An Open Letter to College and University Leaders:

College Completion Must Be Our Priority
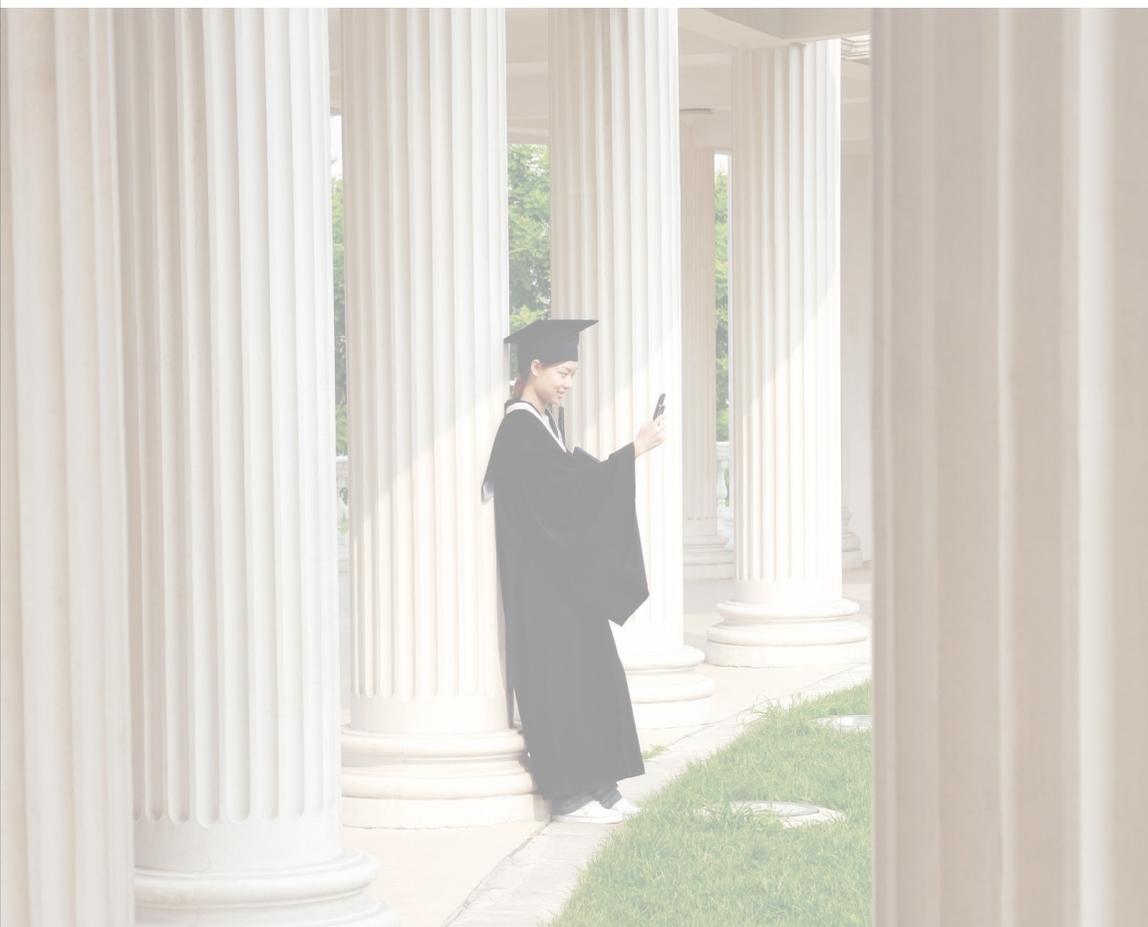
National Commission on Higher
Education Attainment

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**American
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Education™**

Leadership and Advocacy

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The strength of America's future depends on the ingenuity sparked by our college graduates. Now more than ever before, our nation needs leaders of higher education to recommit themselves to making college more accessible and, ultimately, more attainable.

In October 2011, the six presidential associations in Washington, DC convened the National Commission on Higher Education Attainment to assure our nation's higher education preeminence. The commission was unique in scope, bringing together representatives from every sector of higher education, from small liberal arts colleges to community colleges to large research institutions.

By leveraging such diverse perspectives, the commission cultivated an open, honest, and broad dialogue about the collective challenges we face and the roadblocks that lie ahead. The result of these discussions takes the form of this Open Letter to College and University Leaders, a summary of the commission's core principles and workable recommendations to our colleagues in higher education.

Most important, this letter is a renewed call for collective and immediate action at a pivotal moment for higher education. We must make bold decisions and seize opportunities, we must do it now, and we must do it together. We ask for your help and commitment to ensuring a bright future for higher education.

E. Gordon Gee
President
The Ohio State University

The number of Americans attending college is at a historic high, but far too many never make it to graduation. This is an unacceptable loss of human potential–a waste of time, resources, and opportunity. Left unaddressed, it will hinder social mobility and impede the nation's economic progress. This is why we have come together as education leaders to declare that college completion must be our priority.

In our increasingly globalized world, the most economically successful nations will need a highly educated workforce with the expertise and skills to adapt to ever more complex technological demands in the workplace. It's no secret that millions of low-skill, often well-paid manufacturing jobs have already been lost to automation or off-shoring. The majority of jobs created recently and most of those that will be created in the near future will require at least some postsecondary education.

But there is a strong social argument that also demands enhanced efforts to increase college completion: by every important measurement we have, college graduates fare better individually than those who lack a degree. It's widely known that the college educated will, on average, enjoy significantly higher earnings and will be less likely to experience unemployment and dependency on social welfare programs. But the benefits of a college education go well beyond money and employment: graduates are more likely to have jobs with health insurance benefits and pensions; they are less likely to divorce, to be victims of violence, or to commit crimes. They will be more tolerant, open-minded, and civically engaged, and they will be healthier, happier, and live longer. So as America becomes ever more diverse and as a new generation of Americans seeks economic security for themselves and their families, a college credential is ever more important.

In 2011, the Obama administration asked the American Council on Education (ACE) to convene a group of college and university

presidents to discuss steps that individual institutions could take to increase the number of Americans who complete college. Many other groups have already explored this issue and have put forward a broad array of ideas to boost college completion, many of which are important and valuable. Our goal was to look at this issue from the viewpoint of college and university leaders. With the help of several leading higher education organizations[1], the task force created a forum for leaders of all types of colleges and universities to discuss this urgent national priority. The conversations were rich and spanned a wide range of topics. There were areas of unanimous agreement as well as topics that sparked serious disagreements. The institutions around the table had very different missions and had experienced different levels of student success. But we quickly realized that the common denominator was our eagerness to learn from each other, to share experiences and identify steps we could each take on our own campuses, and then to share our findings with all campus and university leaders.

> **We call on every college and university president and chancellor to make retention and completion a critical campus priority.**

At the end of the process we reached two very broad conclusions. First, we were dismayed that a country so rightfully proud of pioneering mass higher education through groundbreaking measures like the Morrill Land Grant Act, the GI Bill, and the Higher Education Act now faces unsatisfactory and stagnating college completion rates.

But we were also heartened during our meetings to learn about the concrete steps that some colleges and universities have already taken—some small and others large-scale—to increase the number of students who stay enrolled and complete their education. But many of the projects are new and the results are not yet clear. We believe these efforts are a good first step, but every campus can do more.

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[1] The National Commission on Higher Education Attainment was created with participation from the American Council on Education, the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

We need to do more. Therefore, we call on every college and university president and chancellor to make retention and completion a critical campus priority. We believe every institution must pay as much attention to the number of degrees it grants—completion—as it does to success in admissions and recruitment. It is now time for all colleges and universities to marshal the resources needed to make completion our strategic priority.

College completion begins with access: the expansion of opportunity that defines the American creed. Promoting and sustaining access to higher education has grown more important than ever. Nontraditional students, whether first-generation undergraduates, working adults, or part-time students, now far outnumber traditional undergraduates and will become an ever-larger share of the nation's student population. Access alone is not enough, however. For all students, traditional or not, offering access without a commitment to help students complete their degrees is a hollow promise.

While the central responsibility is ours, colleges and universities cannot do this alone. Notably, university leaders confront the challenges of improving attainment at a time when most also face unprecedented financial difficulties. State support for higher education has fallen by 25 percent in real terms since 2008. In 2012 alone, the decline was 7.6 percent, the biggest drop in half a century. One-third of states saw double digit drops. This disinvestment in higher education is terribly damaging and undermines efforts to expand and enhance academic and support services for students.

The complex economic and political environment facing postsecondary education may simply represent the "new normal" for many institutions. That means creative solutions are imperative. There will always be obstacles to progress in improving student retention, but they must not become excuses.

We call on our colleagues to take prompt, decisive action to address this goal. Deeds and results, not rhetoric, are what the nation needs. To that end, in this letter we lay out a blueprint for a campus-level college completion campaign designed to prevent so many undergraduates from falling by the wayside as they attempt to earn degrees.

Increasing the number of graduating students isn't an arcane science. It involves a mindset and a series of concrete actions that are

well known to many academic leaders, but which have not always been implemented on a widespread and consistent basis. Fortunately, this is starting to change. Institutions ranging from Quinnipiac University (CT) to The City University of New York (CUNY) and the University of Wisconsin System have created significant initiatives to boost completion rates by focusing institutional attention on student retention, giving faculty shared responsibility for degree attainment, and creating programs that recognize the needs of a new student demographic. The specific details of each of these efforts may not always be easy to take to scale, and the "newness" of some initiatives means that hard evidence about success may not yet be available, but evidence regarding the underlying concept is clear. We have to make improving retention and boosting student success everybody's business. This commission believes that means taking a close look at three broad categories where reform is sorely needed: changing campus culture, improving cost-effectiveness, and making better use of data.

> **We cannot pursue greater student success by limiting access to higher education.**

I. Changing campus culture to boost student success

Before any concrete steps can be taken to improve retention, institutional leaders must frequently and publicly underscore their personal commitment to increasing the number of students who graduate. This is priority number one. Above all, they must convey that this is a pressing problem in order to make the case that the entire campus needs to be involved in improving retention and completion.

College leaders must also avoid pitfalls. First, efforts to improve retention and completion must not come at the expense of access. After all, the easiest way to boost graduation rates would be to accept only those students with high academic qualifications. We cannot pursue greater student success by limiting access to higher education. Second, quality cannot be compromised. Lowering academic standards would also boost the number of graduates, but such tactics would not honor the commitment colleges and universities have to serve students and society.

Education leaders must also guard against one-size-fits-all solutions. From community colleges to research universities, institutions have diverse missions and serve a wide variety of students. As a result, no one strategy or single set of tactics is likely to work equally well for all schools. But the experiences of a range of colleges and universities around the country, together with ongoing evaluations, point to a number of major areas where administrators and faculty can take action to improve student outcomes.

Strategies

- **Assign ownership.** Presidents and chancellors must clearly and unambiguously assign responsibility for enhancing student retention and graduation. Research on degree completion and attainment shows that "ownership" matters: putting somebody in charge of developing and implementing plans to increase student achievement focuses energy and attention. For example, in 2011, Quinnipiac University appointed an associate vice president for retention and academic success, responsible for ensuring a coordinated and effective response to students identified as academically at-risk. One key step Quinnipiac takes is to identify students who may need help as early as possible and provide assistance to them as a way to increase retention and graduation rates. Given the unambiguous evidence about the strong relationship between institutional commitment and degree completion, we urge every postsecondary institution to ensure that a senior official is responsible for identifying and putting into place specific measures to improve retention and time to degree.

- **Implement initiatives campus-wide.** It is crucial, too, that efforts to improve retention be implemented on a campus-wide basis. Assigning ownership does not give the rest of the campus a free pass. Shared responsibility and commitment is vital. Implementing campus-wide strategies can be particularly challenging for huge institutions that serve large numbers of students but it is doable. The City University of New York, for example, has 480,000 students across 24 colleges and universities in Manhattan's five boroughs. Nevertheless, CUNY has embarked on a comprehensive and widely praised initiative to measure every campus's performance on graduation rates and

other outcomes. CUNY has also taken pains to avoid devoting resources to what Chancellor Matthew Goldstein calls "haphazard trial ballooning," instead promoting only programs that have clear, measurable results.

CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), for example, provides academic, social, and financial support to help community college students earn their degrees as quickly as possible. While requiring significant investment in at-risk students, ASAP has doubled participants' three-year graduation rates at the six participating campuses. This kind of effort is possible in an institutional culture in which all campus officials—the president, provost, governing board members, faculty members, and administrators—share and demonstrate a commitment to this critical goal.

- **Study past mistakes.** While efforts to change campus culture are a prerequisite for improving student retention, lasting progress is unlikely unless campus leaders understand why earlier programs were ineffective. The University of Texas at Austin is perhaps the best example of an institution that conducted a far-reaching study of how to overcome longstanding obstacles to improving retention and graduation rates. In response, the university is creating an online tool to better allow students and advisers to monitor progress to a degree; develop more intervention programs to identify and assist students in academic jeopardy; and identify "bottleneck" courses where lack of available seats can impede students' ability to pursue their required paths to graduation. Measures like these, grounded in self-study of past obstacles to student success, can go a long way toward improving degree completion.
- **Creating a student-centered culture.** In 2008, Shenandoah University, a residential, private college in Winchester, Virginia, launched an initiative to recommit its resources toward supporting student engagement and retention. Sparked by the realization that retention rates were stagnant, concerns that campus-wide communications were lacking, and the results of an extensive self-study, Shenandoah evaluated nearly every student interaction, from prospective student inquiries through registration and eventual degree completion.

The goal was to eliminate bureaucratic roadblocks and allow students to focus on the important issues of academics and personal development. To this end, Shenandoah made a concerted effort to streamline administrative procedures, making it easier for students to focus on academics and cultural pursuits. From putting all student services in the same location to reviewing the wording of nearly every written policy for consistency in tone and process, Shenandoah embraced a student-centered "culture of caring." While the results are still emerging, Shenandoah has realized some early success, including a 10 percent gain in freshman to sophomore retention, fewer behavior problems in residence halls, and increased retention and academic success for student-athletes.

- **Improve the academic experience.** It is crucial that faculty see student completion as a central part of their responsibilities and have access to appropriate campus resources for students who need help. Some student retention initiatives have been unsuccessful because they occur at the margins of students' academic life. In fact, research shows that student success in the classroom is most

> **Student success in the classroom is most likely if faculty and administrators set high and clear academic standards...**

likely if faculty and administrators set high and clear academic standards; if students have access to the academic and social support they need; if students' performance is assessed frequently, with regular feedback; and if students are academically and socially engaged with faculty and staff, especially in classroom activities.

One particularly effective technique for keeping students academically engaged from the beginning of their college careers is to embed student support in the classroom. Programs such as the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges challenge the traditional view that students should be instructed in basic skills before they can begin credit-bearing college classes. I-BEST gives undergraduates who need

academic help support from teachers focused on basic skills. Those instructors work with regular faculty to jointly design and teach college-level courses in both technical and vocational subjects. The result is that students simultaneously learn core content and basic academic skills from the same set of faculty.

So far the results are promising: when compared to students with similar levels of proficiency, I-BEST participants earn more credits, are more likely to complete workforce training, and are nine times more likely to graduate. While the program is more costly than traditional classes, these early results suggest that it is a worthwhile investment.

- **Give credit for previous learning.** Campuses should consider expanding the use of a variety of assessments that measure learning that students have acquired outside the traditional college classroom. These tools, known as prior learning assessments, include the College Board's College-Level Examination Program, or CLEP; portfolio assessments such as those administered by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and Excelsior College (NY); and evaluation of workforce training, military occupations and training, and other college equivalency evaluations by the American Council on Education. We underscore that the authority and responsibility for making academic credit decisions is clearly in the hands of institutions. Nonetheless, where proven measures documenting student knowledge are available, campuses ought to use them.

> **Adult learners are far less likely than their traditional-age peers to complete their degrees.**

- **Provide support services for nontraditional students.** Campus-wide responsibility for improving graduation and completion should extend well beyond the classroom. For nontraditional students in particular, support services are vital. Many of these non-traditional students are adults: they are often financially independent, working full-time, with dependents and family responsibilities to juggle, and have returned to college after an extended period of time away from formal studies. What's more, adult learners are far less likely than their traditional-age peers to complete their degrees. Support for adult students might

include everything from providing counselors to help plan their schedules to making sure that child care and transportation are in place to meet students' needs.

Veterans constitute a growing portion of the nontraditional student population, and many campuses are expanding services to support their return and enrollment in higher education. Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey is a recognized leader in serving returning veterans. Veteran-friendly services include a dedicated office of veterans services staffed by a full-time counselor to provide guidance in navigating financial aid packages and making connections to peer mentoring and career counseling. Veterans also have access to a center for psychological services that treats service members, veterans, and their families from not just the university, but also the surrounding community. Additional programs include veterans' career development, an active student veterans organization, and a robust prior learning assessment process for translating military training and experience into their degree programs.

- **Teach the teachers.** Inadequate attention to faculty teaching is often cited as a cause of low student retention rates. Many colleges have invested in faculty development over the years, but such programs are rarely well attended, are poorly designed, or both. Many faculty members are simply never trained in how to teach. Fortunately, this is starting to change. Institutions such as Chandler–Gilbert Community College (AZ), Moraine Valley Community College (IL), and Richland College (TX) require all faculty to participate in professional development programs. As a result, they learn the teaching, assessment, and curriculum-design skills they will need to help all students, and in particular those requiring basic skills instruction.

  All institutions ought to take stock of the steps they currently take—or do not take—to ensure that faculty have the appropriate pedagogical knowledge to communicate effectively with the students they teach.

II. Improving cost-effectiveness and quality

The second major priority is improving the efficiency with which resources are used to educate students. We again underscore that there is no single action that will immediately yield improved retention and completion. Strategies to contain costs and therefore minimize tuition increases can be very broad-based or quite specific. The University System of Maryland, for example, with the active involvement of state government, undertook a wide range of fiscal and academic steps that saved $250 million over five years, significantly reduced the time to degree, and resulted in some of the lowest tuition increases in the nation. Moreover, it also fundamentally changed and improved the university's relationship and sense of partnership with the state. Unfortunately, not all institutions will have the backing of public officials to implement such far-reaching changes. But other institutions have enacted more highly targeted changes that have or seem likely to boost degree productivity without reducing academic quality or diminishing access.

Strategies

- **Offer flexibility to working adults.** Delivering education that is accessible to working students—in other words, offering flexibility in both time and place of instruction—is effective in helping more students make it to graduation. At Metropolitan State University in Minnesota's Twin Cities, for example, classes are offered in 32 locations, including at community colleges and industrial and corporate sites. The university, founded in 1972 to serve adult students, also has a flexible course schedule that includes evening, weekend, and online courses (one-third of students take at least one online course). In addition, it offers popular individualized degree programs. The university's efforts have paid off: Metropolitan State has the highest first-to-second-year persistence rate in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System.

  A small but growing number of institutions have tried a related tactic: they are catering to adult students with children or inflexible work schedules by offering "midnight classes." These late-night courses make use of classroom space that is often spoken for during regular hours, especially on overcrowded campuses. Bunker Hill Community College

in Boston implemented such a strategy in 2009. Built to accommodate 2,500 students, the school now struggles to make room for 13,000 enrollees. An instructor volunteered to teach a class at midnight, just about the only time when classrooms weren't in use. The slot turned out to be surprisingly popular: within two years, the school was offering a significant number of midnight classes.

- **Ease credit transfer.** Another vital strategy for boosting attainment is to ensure that students are able to apply all the college credits they have received toward earning a degree. Significant numbers of students who move from one institution to another find that some of their coursework is ineligible for transfer credit. What's more, many are unaware of which classes will transfer and which will not, resulting in wasted time and resources. In Indiana, for example, community college students had difficulty navigating the credit-transfer process to four-year schools. In response, the state instituted a common general education curriculum for all state institutions, together with a common course-numbering system designed to make credit transfer policies crystal

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clear and reduce wasted credits. Similarly, the Tennessee Board of Regents created a general education core that applies to all institutions in the state system.

We do not mean to imply that any and every credit should be eligible for transfer. This must remain the decision of individual institutions. But there is plenty of room for a much more deliberate strategy, across institutions, to ensure that students do not waste time and money on credits that don't help them progress toward a meaningful credential.

- **Encourage competency-based learning.** Competency-based programs are also receiving growing attention as an effective strategy for giving adult students credit for the skills they have already developed, thus speeding their journey toward a degree. In recent years, institutions like Western Governors University

and Indiana's Ivy Tech Community College have attracted significant attention for pioneering this approach. Now a large, traditional public institution, the University of Wisconsin System, has announced its own version of competency-based learning. If successful, the university's new Flexible Degree could serve as an innovative model for large state systems that have often been reluctant to depart from conventional degree structures.

Wisconsin's Flexible Degree, announced in June 2012 and set to be piloted in 2013 and 2014, is geared to meet the needs of working or unemployed adults. Courses will be mostly taken online, allowing students to set their own schedules and work at their own pace. In addition, the competency-based model will let students earn credit for prior learning, using exams that can be taken from home or a workplace. The goal: to move students as quickly as possible toward degree completion. Finally, the program will tailor classes to nontraditional students by having faculty members reformat classes into smaller segments, dubbed "modules." This practice will allow working adults who need to start and pause their studies because of work and family commitments to complete modules gradually as they work toward a degree.

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- Deliver courses more efficiently. To improve retention and completion, postsecondary institutions must also continue seeking ways to enhance student learning outcomes, and this may require a redesign of the way courses are delivered. Programs pioneered by Carole Twigg, founder of the National Center for Academic Transformation, and Candace Thille, director of Carnegie Mellon University's (PA) Open Learning Initiative, have received considerable attention for the approach they take to student learning. Both efforts use computer technology to create individualized teaching plans, combined with ongoing evaluations and, in some cases, classroom instruction, to deliver comparable student outcomes in less time or less expensively. Innovative, high-quality, lower-cost

initiatives such as the Khan Academy integrate cognitive science, information technology, videography, and academic discipline expertise in novel ways. Within higher education, the emergence of massive open online courses may change how we serve students to accommodate their schedules using novel new platforms, social media, and predictive analytics. These analytics—a kind of data mining—enable faculty to see where students are experiencing difficulty and make continuous improvements in the learning results.

These kinds of productivity improvements could become an important element of campus retention strategies for two principal reasons: cost savings from more efficient course delivery have the potential to free up resources for attainment initiatives, while helping students earn credits more quickly should speed their progress toward graduation. We believe these new forms of teaching and learning are promising. However, we recognize that they must be carefully evaluated to see whether they do in fact improve retention and completion, without compromising the important role faculty members play in deepening students' understanding of course material.

- **Narrow student choice to promote completion.** There are many other ways to rethink how instruction is delivered. In Tennessee, for example, state technical schools use only cohort-based, block course schedules for technical diplomas and certificates. In other words, students have few choices about which classes to take toward a particular degree, and they must complete their degree within a fixed period of time. The result has been a much higher rate of degree completion, and at a much faster pace than in the past. The state board of regents is now bringing the model to the state's 19 community colleges.

In a related vein, as part of its efforts to improve students' progress toward graduation, a task force on graduation rates at The University of Texas at Austin recommended eliminating simultaneous majors unless the student can demonstrate that having a simultaneous major will not delay degree completion. In addition, the task force also recommended the university enforce an optional state policy that increases tuition for students who have not graduated despite earning more than 30 hours above the required number of credits.

- **Improving remedial services.** Beyond instructional delivery, colleges and universities need to focus systematically on better ways to give students academic support services. Indiana's Ivy Tech has also shown particular success in this area. It has improved skills assessments for incoming students to pinpoint their academic weaknesses. It then requires students who place into remediation to participate in advising sessions and create individualized academic plans. Instead of requiring students to take long remedial courses, instruction may take the form of short modules, refresher courses, or supplemental instruction that accompanies on-level classes.
- **Optimize non-core services.** The Ohio State University recently leased the management of its parking operations as part of a comprehensive strategy to generate new revenue to support academic excellence and boost student achievement in a time of decreasing public funding for higher education. Over 50 years, the $483 million contract will provide $3.1 billion in investment earnings for academic initiatives such as hiring more faculty, offering more student scholarships, and supporting the arts and humanities. It also will fund the university's bus services, and is projected to increase the long-term investment pool by $4.9 billion.

III. Making better use of data to boost success

The third major area where strong campus leadership can improve student outcomes is better data collection and analysis. Every college and university leader in the country receives meticulous—perhaps obsessive—updates detailing the institution's total number of applications, acceptances, and paid deposits. But few routinely receive comparable levels of information about student retention, time to degree, and completion. The result is that campus retention and completion rates are less visible, particularly for students who transfer in and out of other institutions, or who interrupt their studies.

The lack of good data stems in part from the many practical challenges to collecting it, including the differing definitions and expectations of state and federal governments and accreditors. Nevertheless, some institutions are showing how data-driven interventions can be used to improve retention and completion, using information that is

already available. Two examples illustrate ways that the purposeful use of student data might boost student achievement and therefore degree completion.

Strategies

- Pinpoint weaknesses in preparation. Harper College is a two-year institution in suburban Chicago where administrators once focused heavily on increasing enrollment because budgets depended largely on the number of incoming students each semester. However, just 1,800 of the school's 35,000 students were completing certificates or degrees annually. In addition, Harper officials lacked key information, such as how many students left after their first year. An analysis of student transcripts showed that the way students are taught

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developmental math in high school affects their later ability to complete a degree or certificate. As a result, faculty members began working with local high schools to improve math instruction and student assessments. Harper officials hope that this change, together with other measures to increase retention, will help it meet a new goal of raising its number of completions to 30,600 over 10 years, up from a projected 20,000 completions.

Using testing data to identify high school students who need to improve their academic preparation is another promising retention strategy. At The California State University (CSU), more than 60 percent of the nearly 40,000 first-time freshmen require remedial education in English, mathematics, or both. This poor preparation is all the more disconcerting because these students all have taken the required college preparatory curriculum and earned at least a "B" grade point average in high school. The cost in time and money to these students and to the state is substantial. As a result, CSU, in collaboration with the State Board of Education and the California Department of Education launched the Early Assessment Program (EAP). The

program provides opportunities for students to measure their readiness for college-level English and mathematics in their junior year of high school, and allows them to improve their skills during their senior year. The goal of EAP is to have California high school graduates enter CSU fully prepared to begin college-level study.

- **Harness information technology to identify at-risk students.** Identifying students struggling academically while there is still time to help them is an ongoing challenge for professors and administrators. A new initiative funded by the University of Wisconsin System aims to help by carefully monitoring students' online course activity, combining that data with other information about students' academic history, and identifying those who need extra support to succeed. The project is being implemented at a number of campuses, from the system's two-year colleges to its Madison flagship. It uses a computer program that looks at factors such as how long a student is logged on, whether he or she participates in online discussion boards, and how long the student devotes to working on a particular problem. The initiative is voluntary, but if successful it might eventually be expanded significantly across the 181,000-student system.

- **Communicate with students about progress to graduation.** Walla Walla Community College in Washington State uses a range of data strategies to focus on improved completion. One particularly promising tool is a "Degree Estimator," which analyzes students' transcripts and tracks their progress against program requirements to determine how close they are to completion. Walla Walla notifies students who are close to earning a credential, including those no longer enrolled. It offers them a small incentive, such as bookstore gift certificate, to meet with a counselor to discuss how to stay on track or get back on track to complete the credential.

Just as better use of data at the institutional level is crucial,

> **Just as better use of data at the institutional level is crucial, so is the creation of high-quality, nationally comparable data on university performance on a range of measures.**

so is the creation of high-quality, nationally comparable data on university performance on a range of measures, including graduation rates. This information is not currently available because of the serious limitations of the federal government's Student Right to Know data. Student Right to Know defines the official federal graduation rate but it does not capture important aspects of student persistence and completion. Students are not tracked as they move from institution to institution, which means that transfer students are counted as dropouts of the campus they leave. And, if they ever complete a degree at a subsequent institution, they are not counted as a graduate. Moreover, part-time students, who make up one-quarter of all enrollments at four-year undergraduate institutions, are not counted in the statistics at all. The bottom line is that the Department of Education's official measure provides an incomplete and inaccurate picture of student persistence and completion.

Just how incomplete was recently demonstrated by the American Council on Education, using data available from the National Student Clearinghouse that includes students who transfer as well as students who are still actively pursuing a degree. The study revealed that including these students in the calculation, rather than counting them as dropouts, increases institutional success rates significantly. For example, at public, four-year institutions, including transfer students who graduate from another institution boosts the sector's graduation rate from 54 percent to 63 percent. If students who are still enrolled are counted, the rate increases to 78 percent, a gain of almost 25 percentage points from the "official" number. Similarly, for private, nonprofit four-year institutions, the comparable numbers are 63 percent under the federal definition, 73 percent and 82 percent if students who are still enrolled are included.

To that end, the six presidential associations are developing an alternative methodology for calculating a more complete measure of academic progress. Known as the Student Achievement Measure, this approach, unlike the current federal definition, will track and report the progress of full-time students across institutions they attend. It will include both

those enrolling for the first time and those transferring between institutions. The methodology might in the future also be modified to include part-time students.

In brief, we know that we do not graduate enough students and we know that the official statistics undercount the success we do have. Better data are critical. But in calling for more accurate information, we have no intention of minimizing the uneven record of many American colleges and universities at graduating the students they enroll. Regardless of how we measure student retention, graduation, or completion, some schools are not performing as well as they should.

Conclusion

The ideas we have laid out are no panacea for the challenges facing American higher education. We focus on retention and completion because of a shared understanding that increasing the number of college graduates is an economic and moral imperative. There is much that we can and should do to graduate more students: changing campus culture, improving cost-effectiveness, and making student success the central academic priority at every institution. To this end, we call on each and every institution to assess its success at retaining and graduating students, identify changes that will improve student achievement, and implement them without delay.

> We believe that the most important first step for institutions is to assess candidly their record of keeping and graduating students, or helping them transfer successfully to another school.

As we noted earlier, the wide range of initiatives underway across the diverse universe of American higher education is promising. But in many cases, it is too soon to tell whether they will be effective. We unanimously agree that all campuses should examine their current efforts, identify and implement promising practices, and rigorously assess their success or failure. We hope this will be done in the same spirit that Franklin D. Roosevelt articulated when he gave the commencement address at Oglethorpe University (GA) in May 1932 and called for "bold, persistent experimentation.

It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."

We believe that the most important first step for institutions is to assess candidly their record of keeping and graduating students, or helping them transfer successfully to another school. For the vast majority of campuses with room for improvement, we urge them to set specific goals to improve retention (or successful transfer) in the short term and graduation over the longer term. For those that already graduate a large share of their students, we urge them to re-double their efforts to ensure that those rates do not decline. In all cases, we recommend that campus leaders be held accountable for setting and achieving those goals by their boards of trustees.

But while we strongly believe that each campus can and must address these issues, we do not accept, as some critics of higher education claim, that all it will take to boost educational achievement is for colleges and universities to work a little harder. Student success depends on a wide range of factors and some of these are partly or completely outside our control.

For example, as we noted earlier, it is no secret that states have been disinvesting in public higher education, which enrolls 80 percent of all students, for a generation. Sadly, this trend has accelerated in recent years, which has led to cuts in academic and support service programs and higher tuitions. And declining state support hurts all colleges—in many states, budget cuts have led to reductions in student aid for students at both public and private institutions. The federal government also must stand steadfast in its commitment to student aid. Pell grants and other federal assistance programs are the bedrock of meeting the promise of higher education for low-income Americans.

In addition, the nation needs better data to measure how well we do at retaining and graduating all students. The nation's basic yard-stick for measuring institutional graduation rates is seriously flawed and totally inadequate given the enrollment patterns of today's students. Better information alone will not solve the problem but without better data we will have no way of knowing whether we are succeed-ing or falling further behind.

Finally, students themselves bear a substantial share of the respon-sibility for their own education. Institutions can and must take

additional steps to increase the chances that students will be successful, but it is the students who must show up for class, do the required work, and demonstrate mastery. Higher education demands active and engaged participation by those who enroll.

But having noted campus leaders cannot solve every one of these challenges by themselves, we call on all college and university leaders to do what is squarely in their purview: to carefully and comprehensively review their academic and support programs and make bold changes that will boost student retention and completion.

America's colleges and universities rightfully take great pride in the way that our central activities—teaching, research, and service— serve the national interest. Equally so, we celebrate our history of meeting the nation's needs. Every time the nation has asked something of us, we have delivered. In the last 50 years alone, we dramatically expanded access to higher education for an unprecedented number of non-traditional students. We created the world's best network of research universities. We established community colleges across the land to provide high-quality technical training. In none of these cases was the path forward clear. Success was never guaranteed.

The challenge we face today is urgent. We need a better educated citizenry. Regardless of whether we cast the goal as enhancing individual opportunity or ensuring the nation's long-term economic well-being, the future favors the educated. We know what needs to be done. Now is the time for us to do it.

National Commission on Higher Education Attainment Membership

The National Commission on Higher Education Attainment was created with participation from the American Council on Education (ACE), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (A·P·L·U), and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU).

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