

REDUCE TIME AND
ACCELERATE SUCCESSCOMPLETE
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.

Reduce time-to-degree and increase the number of students completing on time: *Significantly increasing college completion is possible only when states and institutions get serious about the problem of time.*

WHY ACCELERATE SUCCESS?

The shortest path to a degree or certificate is the best one. It's common sense: The more time it takes to graduate, the more life gets in the way — especially for students balancing school, work, and families. As months, semesters, and years go by, it becomes more likely that events and demands outside the classroom will complicate college success.

Faster progress matters because:

- When students have to extend their course-taking over too many semesters and too many years, their chances of ever completing college significantly diminish. Today's college students often are struggling with finances, juggling school with work, and caring for their families. The longer it takes to graduate, the more likely it is that they will tire of their rigorous schedules, run out of tuition money, get discouraged, or need to put other responsibilities before school.
- Most often, the longer it takes students to complete their degrees, the more those degrees cost, and the delays can add up to millions of wasted dollars for students, institutions, and the state. One study in Florida found that credit hours taken in excess of graduation requirements cost the state \$62 million a year. A study of Iowa community college students found that accelerated options saved families the equivalent of \$30.7 million in future college-related expenses.

By designing clear paths for students to complete degree programs more efficiently,

states can help more students earn degrees and control costs for both students and taxpayers.

WAYS TO REDUCE TIME AND
ACCELERATE SUCCESS

A variety of policies and practices can help accelerate students' progress in college, prevent unnecessary delays, and increase degree completions. States should use a combination of the strategies below to ensure that more students earn degrees and credentials on time or in less time.

- **Require all students to have graduation plans and declare majors early.** Establishing formal completion plans for every student upon enrollment, including those who attend part-time, makes it clear from day one: Graduation is the goal. Individual plans also ensure that students know from the beginning that to graduate on time usually requires taking 15 or more credits a semester. For greatest impact, student plans must be continually updated and tracked by their schools. Students also should be required to declare majors as early as possible to avoid aimless academic pursuits, wasting precious time.
- **Reduce unnecessary course-taking.** Campuses should scrutinize degree programs to make sure they do not require extraneous credits that can slow down students or force them to take courses that are not relevant to their degrees. States and institutions should enact caps of 120 credits for a bachelor's degree and 60 credits for an associate

degree so students do not earn excessive numbers of credits, except in rare cases in which program accreditation requires otherwise. An audit of credit requirements could help define such a cap. Once the cap is in place, colleges should be required to make a strong case for exceeding it.

- **Improve transfer policies.** Student success at any and all state institutions should be honored — and counted. Nearly a third of students at four-year colleges will change schools; 60 percent of those at community colleges will do the same. With so many students on the move, statewide legislation and policies must ensure they can carry their credits with them so valuable effort and time are not lost — and precious financial resources and need-based aid are not squandered. This is so fundamental to boosting completion that states must act to achieve the greatest benefit: Individual courses, full programs, and entire degrees should transfer easily and quickly across all public institutions.
- **Require colleges to find consensus on course content and develop a common course numbering system.** States should require institutions to define equivalent content for similar courses at all public higher education institutions and set up a uniform course numbering system. To make progress quickly, states should focus first on courses that make up the transfer core, followed by lower division courses in popular majors. For students who change colleges, this will make it easier to receive credit for classes they've taken — and to know what courses they still need to take for their degrees — while ensuring they are not missing or repeating content.
- **Take attendance.** This underrated strategy can reap big rewards in improving student success.
- **Provide incentives for full-time enrollment and other strategies that enable acceleration.** Full-time students are far more likely to complete degrees. While many part-time students believe they can't afford to attend full-time, comprehensive academic advising and financial aid and tuition policies can help encourage more full-time enrollment. One example is flat-rate tuition policies that provide an incentive for taking more than 12 credit hours a semester. Financial incentives also can be awarded to students who stay on track to graduate by not dropping courses and accumulating only the credits they need to graduate.
- **Use summer.** Students should be encouraged to make better use of summer semester to keep on track to graduate.
- **Use technology.** New delivery models show that online learning can be integrated into traditional course delivery to reduce seat-time. Online course offerings also can help on-campus students fit classes into tight schedules or access courses traditionally offered less frequently.
- **Expand alternative pathways for students to earn college credits early.** There are multiple ways for students to earn college credits while still in high school, shortening their path to college completion. These include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate programs, and early college dual-enrollment opportunities. While ensuring academic rigor, states should require colleges and universities to honor this early achievement by accepting all credits earned. For returning adult students, course credit should be given for prior work experience or competencies certified by the CLEP or other exams.

STATES IN ACTION

Some states already are taking action, at the state level and on campuses, to reduce time-to-degree and accelerate students' success.

- Full-time enrollment in **Connecticut** community colleges increased dramatically when colleges began using full-time enrollment status as the default when they processed students' financial aid applications. The strategy shows students that attending college full-time is often more affordable than they expect.
- **Texas** has a two-step approach to cracking down on credit creep (students' earning unnecessary and excessive credits): First, the college or university loses its state subsidy for students who exceed a certain credit-hour threshold. Second, students are charged out-of-state tuition if they exceed limits for repeating courses or if they take classes that are "substantively identical" to ones they have completed.
- **North Carolina** adds a surcharge to tuition for students who exceed a certain number of credit hours in a four-year degree program.
- **Florida** enshrined a number of acceleration mechanisms in state policy, including dual enrollment (allowing students to earn college credit while in high school), early admission, credit by examination, and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate credit. All of these acceleration models are made possible through a common course-numbering system that also allows credit from two-year colleges to be easily transferred to four-year institutions.
- **Tennessee** is establishing a common core associate degree curriculum consisting of 41 hours of general education courses and 19 hours of pre-major courses. Completing an associate degree will ensure junior-level status at any public four-year institution in the state with all credits guaranteed to transfer.

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.