

ACCESS TO **ATTAINMENT**

**AN ACCESS AGENDA FOR
21ST CENTURY COLLEGE STUDENTS**



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THE ACCESS IMPERATIVE

This agenda is a call to action to improve college access—and completion—for today's students, 21st century students. Ensuring these students achieve their full potential in higher education is no longer optional; it is a national imperative.

We aim here to reinvigorate the dialogue on college access in this country and to develop a road map for aligning research, policy, and practice to ensure greater attainment for all.

The national conversation about postsecondary attainment has brought increased attention to the need to dramatically increase college completion in recent years, and rightfully so.

WITH FEWER THAN

50%

OF ENTERING COLLEGE STUDENTS EARNING ANY CREDENTIAL WITHIN SIX YEARS, THE COMPLETION CRISIS IS A REAL CONCERN.¹

However, the access side of the attainment equation is far from solved as some have suggested. For too many students, access to a quality education remains elusive.

As demographic shifts and economic factors have increased the potential pool of college students in this country, many of the long-standing programs and policies designed to foster access no longer support the needs of today's students.

To adequately address the barriers these students face, we must first recognize that 21st century students do not fit the traditional profile.²



52%

First in their family to complete college



51%

Low- to moderate-income³



44%

Age 24 or above



42%

From communities of color



30%

Attending part-time



28%

Taking care of children or other dependents



26%

Working full-time while enrolled



18%

Non-native English speakers



10%

Immigrants



5%

Active duty military or veterans



BY 2020, THERE WILL BE


**55 MILLION
NEW OPENINGS**

These changes come at a time in American history when we need more than ever for these students to matriculate successfully into college.

By 2020, the year that President Obama set for the United States to once again lead the world in college attainment, there will be 55 million new job openings, and two-thirds of all jobs will require some postsecondary education and training.⁴ Yet it is not possible for our country to reach the president's goal without dramatically improving educational opportunity for 21st century students.

65%

of all job openings
will require some postsecondary
education and training.



We have rallied as a country to improve college access in our not too distant past. Throughout the 20th century, our national leaders took bold actions to remedy the societal problems standing in the way of American opportunity and progress: the Great Society, the War on Poverty, the GI Bill, the Civil Rights Act, and the Higher Education Act, among others.

These policies, though controversial in their time, reaffirmed the basic right of all Americans regardless of background to participate fully in our democracy, not to mention, higher education.

Fast forward to today, and we see headline after headline questioning the value of higher education, despite decades of data clearly demonstrating the personal benefits of higher education,⁵ which accrue in the aggregate to benefit the public good.⁶ We see decades of public disinvestment in higher education, shifting the cost burden substantially onto students and families⁷ and dramatically increasing their levels of debt.⁸ And, we see an erosion of the basic programs and protections provided by the milestone legislation that opened the doors of the nation's colleges and universities in the first place.

Meanwhile, the nation is struggling to retain its competitive edge worldwide and millions of willing Americans are unable to meaningfully contribute to our economy here at home because they continue to lack access to a quality higher education experience, even now, in 21st century America. The goal here is to reignite our national resolve to ameliorate the college access problem in this country. Doing so not only determines the life course of today's aspiring college students, but also our current and future solvency as a nation.

The goal here is to reignite our national resolve to ameliorate the college access problem in this country.

THE STATE OF COLLEGE ACCESS

LOW INCOME



HIGH INCOME

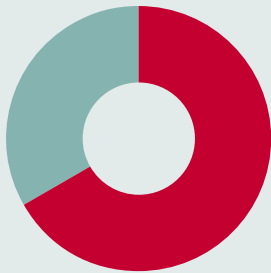


Most young people living in poverty do not reap the benefits of a college education. Fewer than 1 in 10 will earn bachelor's degrees by age 24, compared with 7 in 10 from high-income families.⁹

ONLY HALF OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ENROLL IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DIRECTLY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Though college-going rates for low-income students have doubled in recent decades, only half enroll in postsecondary education directly after high school, a lower college-going rate than high-income students **more than 40 years ago**.¹⁰





TWO-THIRDS OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ATTEND COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS

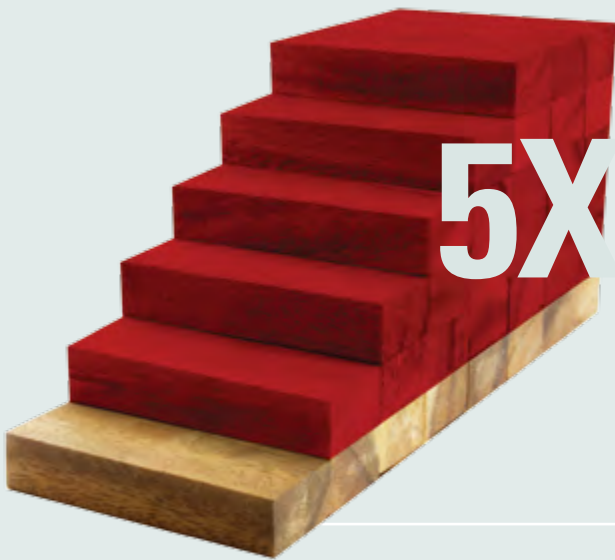
Where and how students access college matters, too. Nearly two-thirds of low-income students attend community colleges and for-profit institutions;¹¹ many of which have low completion rates.¹² They are also more likely to delay going to college and to stop out, lowering their chances of finishing their degrees.¹³

Low-income students are half as likely as their high-income peers to earn bachelor's degrees within six years.¹⁴

20% OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS EARN BACHELOR'S DEGREES WITHIN SIX YEARS



42% OF HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS EARN BACHELOR'S DEGREES WITHIN SIX YEARS



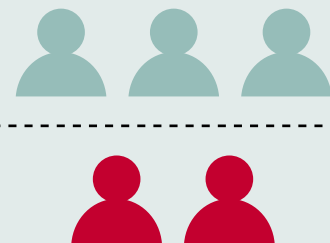
5X MORE LIKELY TO MOVE OUT OF POVERTY

LOW-INCOME INDIVIDUALS ARE MORE LIKELY TO MOVE OUT OF POVERTY IF THEY ATTAIN A COLLEGE DEGREE

Low-income individuals are five times more likely to move out of poverty if they attain a college degree.¹⁵ And, if low-income young adults earned bachelor's degrees at the same rate as their higher-income counterparts, the United States would rank among the top developed countries in the world.¹⁶

With half of school-aged children receiving free- or reduced-price lunch,¹⁷ and more than two in five young adults living at or near the poverty line,¹⁸ not increasing college access for low-income students is not an option this country can afford.

TWO IN FIVE YOUNG ADULTS LIVE AT OR NEAR THE POVERTY LINE



CALL TO ACTION

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

AN ACCESS AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

To develop this access agenda, we consulted with some of the most experienced practitioners and policymakers in higher education. They told us, resoundingly: “We know how to improve college access. We’ve done it. But we’re not done yet.” The barriers facing 21st century students are not necessarily different than those of previous generations. But, the experience of those obstacles has certainly grown in intensity, and the consequences of not overcoming them have grown, too. The imperative to act is clear, and the time to act is now, to improve college access for all students.

“We know how to improve college access. We’ve done it. But we’re not done yet.”

PUBLIC GOOD, NOT PRIVILEGE: Higher education is now a minimum requirement for most jobs in the knowledge economy. As such, access as a basic right for all, regardless of background, will ensure full and equal participation in the workforce and society.

INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY: Access to higher education not only improves the life chances of individuals, but levels the playing field for entire families and communities with the benefits accruing across generations.

REAL, NOT THE BAREST, OPPORTUNITY: Access to higher education is necessary but not sufficient. Real opportunity requires access to quality, yet affordable college options leading to valuable credentials that advance career and life trajectories.

SYSTEMS CHANGE: Improvements to access to higher education requires robust solutions that remove structural barriers and provide critical supports – academic, financial, and social – to students at scale.

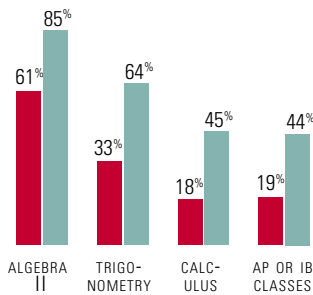
PUBLIC PRIORITY AND WILL: Leadership at all levels – federal, state, city, and institutional – must be engaged and support efforts to increase access to higher education, including strategically targeting scarce resources toward the students who need it most and holding institutions accountable if these students are not served well.

PRIORITIES AND **RECOMMENDATIONS**



1

PREPARE CREATE A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE



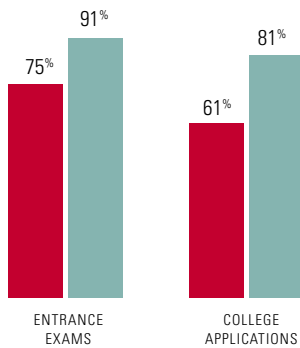
PROBLEM

Low-income high school seniors are less likely than their high-income peers to take college preparatory coursework like advanced math.¹⁹



SOLUTION

Prepare all students with college-ready curricula: Provide **all** students with the rigorous academic preparation and support they need to gain entry to and complete college by ensuring equitable participation in advanced coursework.



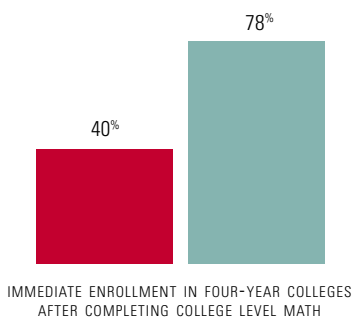
PROBLEM

Low-income high school seniors are less likely than their high-income peers to take the steps toward college enrollment such as college entrance exams or college applications.²⁰



SOLUTION

Guide and track all students toward college: Provide students with adequate counseling to ensure they take the steps necessary to enroll in college and access financial aid.



PROBLEM

Low-income students are more likely to “under-match” into less-selective institutions with lower success rates, regardless of their level of academic preparation.²¹



SOLUTION

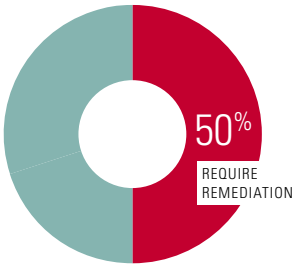
Make students aware of all college options: Provide students with early and regular counseling to ensure they obtain critical information needed to identify the best college fit for their aspirations and level of preparation.

■ Low-income students ■ High-income students

2

ALIGN

CLARIFY AND STRENGTHEN PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE



PROBLEM

50 percent of college students require remediation; 20 percent take 3 or more remedial courses.²²



SOLUTION

Align curricular requirements and address remediation needs ASAP: Collaborate across the pipeline to (1) align high school exit and college entrance and placement requirements, (2) identify students who need remediation early and offer help before leaving high school, the summer before, or as soon as possible after enrolling in college, (3) offer proven remediation practices such as module-based, embedded, or accelerated options to create academic momentum.



PROBLEM

Only about 1 in 4 community college students actually transfers to a four-year institution within six years, despite the fact that the majority (80 percent) expect to earn bachelor's degrees someday.²³



SOLUTION

Ease articulation across colleges: Put in place the necessary agreements to align program requirements between two-year and four-year institutions to allow students to move seamlessly within the higher education system to reach their degree goals.

LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ARE
40% MORE LIKELY TO DELAY ENTRY INTO COLLEGE

PROBLEM

Low-income students are more likely to delay entry into college (40 percent)²⁴ and to stop out of college (41 percent),²⁵ decreasing the likelihood that they will actually finish.²⁶



SOLUTION

Create alternate pathways to college: Provide customized options – such as prior learning assessment, competency-based learning, and flexible scheduling – for adults and other 21st century students.

3

INVEST

MAKE COLLEGE AFFORDABLE



PROBLEM

Tuition has increased at nearly 5 times the rate of inflation over the past 30 years, even faster than healthcare costs,²⁷ due largely to decades of state disinvestment in higher education, substantially shifting the cost burden onto students and their families.²⁸



SOLUTION

Control the cost of college: Reinvest in appropriations for public higher education, to curb the escalating cost of college for students, and to lower their debt burden. Lower the cost of educating students by improving efficiencies in the delivery of courses and services such as through more strategic use of space, schedules, and staff as well as through emerging technology-based solutions.

94%

NEARLY ALL LOW-INCOME STUDENTS HAVE UNMET NEED

even after receiving grant aid from all sources, making them more likely to borrow and to borrow more than their high-income peers.³¹

PROBLEM

The increasing cost of college, the declining purchasing power of federal grant aid,²⁹ and the shift toward non-need aid by states and institutions has created the perfect storm for low-income students.³⁰



SOLUTION

Target financial aid strategically: Focus scarce resources on the students with the greatest need – low-income students – providing adequate levels of aid that allow these students to successfully enroll in and complete college without considerable debt.

FAFSA



PROBLEM

Many low-income students still do not have enough information about how to obtain the aid that is available. In 2011-2012, more than 1.75 million college students who would have likely qualified for a Pell grant did not even file a FAFSA.³²



SOLUTION

Simplify the financial aid process: Make the financial aid application process simple, transparent, predictable, and streamlined across institutions, states, and the federal government. Increase FAFSA awareness through targeted counseling and make FAFSA completion a requirement for all students.

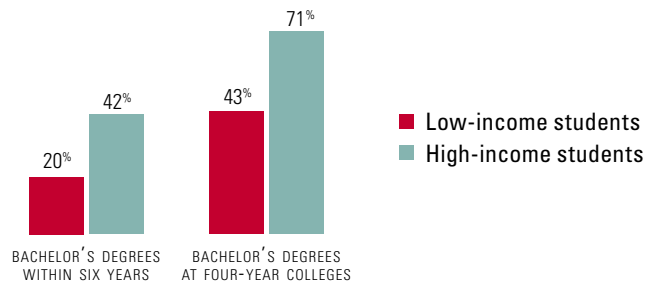
4

SUPPORT

CREATE A COLLEGE-COMPLETION CULTURE

PROBLEM

Low-income students are **HALF** as likely to earn bachelor's degrees as their high-income peers within six years (20 compared with 42 percent). Even among students who begin at four-year colleges, low-income students are much less likely to earn their degrees (43 compared with 71 percent).³³



SOLUTIONS

Streamline pathways to success: Clarify policies and procedures related to course scheduling, degree requirements, registration deadlines, and financial aid to remove structural barriers to completion.

Coordinate support systems across campus: Eliminate program duplication and maximize scarce resources by targeting services to students who need them most. Use data to identify students at risk and to evaluate program effectiveness.

Improve classroom learning to improve completion: Facilitate student engagement with peers and faculty through proven high-impact practices such as active learning, and equip faculty with information to refer students to support services when needed.





ACT

INCREASE COLLEGE ACCESS AND ATTAINMENT



ADVOCATE FOR ACCESS

Increase awareness of the access challenges facing 21st century students, and the supports that can help them succeed, through social media campaigns, events, publications, and other public efforts. Empower students to advocate on their own behalf.



COLLABORATE ON ACCESS EFFORTS


Engage practitioners, policymakers, community leaders, and employers in cross-sector partnerships to align efforts and resources to increase access at sufficient scale to ameliorate the problem.



DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY ON ACCESS

Hold institutions, communities, and systems accountable for performance in increasing the number of students, particularly 21st-century students, who successfully enter and complete college.





**IMPLEMENTING THESE
SOLUTIONS TO THE ACCESS
PROBLEM IS WELL WITHIN
OUR COLLECTIVE ABILITIES.**

We must now resolve to demonstrate collective will and action and hold ourselves accountable for doing so.

For the students. For all of us.

END NOTES

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