Postsecondary Success
Advocacy Priorities

September 2016
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Overview

Higher education is an American success story. For millions of students, our colleges and universities have served as a bridge to opportunity, equipping them for healthy, productive lives.

But today, we as a nation are facing the reality that for many, that bridge has become too narrow and too hard to navigate, with a toll that is too high. Rising costs and debt, stubbornly high dropout rates, and persistent attainment gaps threaten higher education’s ability to meet societal and workforce needs. Recent estimates show that the nation will need 11 million more workers with some form of high-quality post-high school education by 2025 than our system is currently on course to produce.¹

Just as importantly, those workers will be largely drawn from the new majority of students—low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults—who have historically faced the highest hurdles getting to and through college. Advancing equity in educational opportunity is both an economic necessity and a moral imperative.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Postsecondary Success strategy is built on the belief that significant, sustained, and student-centered change is required for higher education to live up to its potential as an engine of economic development and social mobility. The strategy is dedicated to building human capital by closing attainment gaps, focusing on three levers for bringing about that change:

- Innovative solutions such as digital learning, technology-enabled advising, and streamlined academic pathways that help students navigate some of the most common barriers to achieving a credential today.

- Robust networks that support widespread implementation and integration of these solutions—providing implementation support, examples of leading practice, resource sharing, and guidance and leadership on advocacy. Experience shows that real change affecting student outcomes depends on a combination of innovative approaches; there are no “silver bullets.”

- Powerful incentives that move campuses and systems to adopt and integrate solutions for student success and/or remove barriers to those efforts. These include the use of data to highlight success gaps and measure the effectiveness of solutions, as well as financing mechanisms such as outcome-based funding and financial aid for students. They also include policy advocacy at the federal and state levels.²

¹ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, analysis prepared for the foundation (2014).
² Focus states for the Postsecondary Success strategy include: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.
In 2015, Postsecondary Success released its first-ever statement of policy advocacy priorities. This document is an update to that statement, reflecting advances in both program and policy, and noting what is still to be learned and done. The statement addresses both federal and state policy, recognizing that the strategy’s work at the federal level is more mature and that state efforts are heavily focused on evidence gathering at this point in time. At both levels, policy advocacy focuses on three key areas:

DATA AND INFORMATION

Efforts to significantly boost college access and success are hindered by missing measures, competing definitions of the same measure, and disconnected data systems. The foundation’s advocacy efforts in this area focus on both federal and state policy, seeking to build a truly national strategy for gathering, reporting, and using key performance measures that reflect the experiences and outcomes of all college students, especially returning and transfer students, who are too often rendered invisible in current data systems.

There is growing consensus in the field about what to measure, which makes the conversation about gathering and using that information increasingly important and urgent. A comprehensive strategy for improving data infrastructure and capacity within and across institutional, state, and federal collections is essential to supporting initiatives aimed at achieving our attainment goals. Better data and data systems can lead to better decision-making—by students, policymakers, and educators alike—that lead to better postsecondary outcomes for all.
FINANCE AND FINANCIAL AID

College affordability—for students and for taxpayers—continues to be a subject of public and policymaker concern. Mounting tuition and debt levels, coupled with ongoing fiscal constraints at the federal and state levels, are raising questions of sustainability and consequences. How long can these trends be sustained? Who will be harmed most if there is not a change in course?

At the federal level, the foundation’s advocacy priorities include simplifying the processes of applying for and allocating student financial aid, ensuring that aid dollars are targeted to students with the greatest need, and ensuring that aid programs provide strong institutional and student incentives for enrollment, persistence, and completion. There has been progress in this area, particularly with respect to the aid application process, but much more remains to be done.

In the states, the focus is twofold: (a) supporting states in reviewing and revising their funding models for public institutions to ensure better and more equitable student outcomes; and (b) supporting states in developing and implementing financial aid programs, policies, and practices that take into account the changing needs of today’s students.

STUDENT-CENTERED PATHWAYS

For too many students, the path to a credential is longer than it should be, or simply leads to a dead end. Poorly targeted remedial courses and programs, unclear or conflicting signals about what courses to take or when to take them, and weak or non-existent transfer and articulation policies consume scarce resources and contribute to student dropout. Innovations that address these issues are being developed but still exist largely at the margins.

The foundation’s federal advocacy in this area is limited, and deals primarily with incentives for institutional experimentation with and evaluation of new academic models designed to streamline the path to a credential, such as competency-based education. At the state level, areas of focus include promoting statewide efforts to redesign remedial education, establishing well-defined paths to certificates and degrees in key fields, and implementing and enforcing robust transfer and articulation policies.

2017 will bring significant change to the policy landscape, with a new administration and Congress at the federal level and a number of new governors and legislators in the states. The foundation will engage with them on the full range of issues outlined in this document, connected by a common message: as a nation, we face significant choices about the direction of our higher education system and whether it will be a bridge to opportunity or a reproducer of privilege. The actions taken—or not taken—in our nation’s capital and in state capitals will have a significant impact on which direction is chosen.
Data and Information

GOAL

Support the development of a comprehensive national data infrastructure that enables the secure and consistent collection and reporting of key performance metrics for all students in all institutions. These data are essential for supporting the change needed to close persistent attainment gaps and produce an educated and diverse workforce with career-relevant credentials for the 21st century.

BACKGROUND

In this era of escalating costs and uncertain outcomes, it is important that prospective students, policymakers, and the public have answers to commonsense questions about whether and which colleges offer value: a quality education at an affordable price. Unfortunately, these stakeholders still lack answers to critical questions about how—and how well—students are moving into and through higher education. This is particularly true for the new majority of students, such as low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults, whose experiences are often missing or obscured in outmoded data systems.

The problem stems from an aging data infrastructure consisting of a set of disconnected systems, all of which were created for distinct purposes over time, but none of which are presently able to fully provide key information about today’s students and institutions. Data collection and reporting is inconsistent, duplicative, and/or incomplete across these systems, increasing burden for institutions while decreasing data quality. Data sharing and privacy and security are also not governed by a coherent and complementary set of policies and practices within and across colleges, states, the federal government, and private entities. Modernizing our data infrastructure is an urgent priority (see Our Data Infrastructure: Real vs. Possible, below).
STRENGTHENING POSTSECONDARY DATA INFRASTRUCTURE TO COVER ALL STUDENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

CURRENT
- Public Institutions
- Private Institutions
- For-Profit Institutions
- Other Providers
- State K12 Systems
- State Higher Education Systems
- State Longitudinal Data Systems (IP20W)
- State Workforce/Labor Systems
- Other State Agencies
- Other Agreements
- WICHE Exchange
- Labor Exchanges (WRIS, LEHD)
- ED/IPEDS
- ED/FSA
- ED/NCES
- ED/Grants
- DOL
- DOD/VA
- SSA/IRS
- Other FED
- NSC
- Voluntary Systems

IDEAL
- All Institutions/Providers
- State K12 Systems
- State Longitudinal Data Systems
- State Workforce Systems
- National Postsecondary Data System
- IPEDS-1 (aggregate institution data)
- Federal Student Aid
- IRS/SSA
- Other Federal Programs/Agencies (ED, DOL, DOD/VA)
- IPEDS-5 (aggregate student data)
- Federal Student-Level Data System
- National Student Clearinghouse
- State Data Exchange

KEY
- All entities share data (required)
- Some entities share data (not required)
PROGRESS

Fortunately, there have been steps in the right direction. Over the past decade, leading institutions and organizations have identified key performance metrics and have made improvements in the data systems to collect and report them. Thousands of colleges serving millions of students in all 50 states have participated in initiatives such as Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design, and Complete College America, which have created and collected new and more robust measures of student progress and outcomes. These initiatives have helped to spotlight students most often missing or invisible in data systems—low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults, as well as transfer students and part-time students—and have underscored the value of data as a tool for closing equity gaps.

In 2016, the foundation released Answering the Call: Institutions and States Lead the Way Toward Better Measures of Postsecondary Performance, which captures the insights and lessons from leading institutions and organizations and presents a framework of core metrics related to student access, progression, completion, cost, and post-college outcomes, as well as institutional efficiency and equity. These metrics are gaining traction with federal and state policymakers eager to guide their own decision-making and equip students and families with better information about where and how to invest in postsecondary education. Advocacy efforts for the metrics are being led by more than 30 organizations participating in the Postsecondary Data Collaborative (see Measuring What Matters, below).

While there is growing consensus around a core set of metrics, more needs to be done, particularly with respect to improving our national data infrastructure. Policy action has incrementally improved federal and state data collections in recent years, particularly with respect to linking data systems across sectors and agencies. Cross-state data linkages have also gained traction, as the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education’s (WICHE) multi-state data exchange increased available data on student outcomes for four initial states and is currently expanding to additional states. Additionally, the release of the federal College Scorecard in 2015 underscored the potential for leveraging data systems across agencies to report more robust information about colleges, such as loan repayment rates and median earnings, without increasing collection burden on institutions.

Still, a more comprehensive strategy is needed. In 2016, the Institute for Higher Education Policy convened a collaborative effort that produced a series of 11 papers that presents various options for improvement. In the papers, recognized experts outline near-term improvements to enhance the utility of existing data systems such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS) and to strengthen data linkages between systems maintained by agencies across the federal government including the Departments of Education, Treasury, and Defense. The series also takes up longer-term

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3 See also Toward Convergence: A Technical Guide for the Postsecondary Metrics Framework, which defines each of the recommended metrics and explores ways in which students, policymakers, and institutions can use the metrics to inform college decision-making, design policies, and improve student success.
5 Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange (MLDE).
solutions such as creating new systems or exchanges, including a federal student-level data system, a proposal that is attracting renewed interest. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the series includes papers on increasing institutional data capacity and ensuring student privacy and data security (see Envisioning the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure in the 21st Century below).

THE WORK AHEAD

The foundation is committed to supporting policy efforts to strengthen the national postsecondary data infrastructure to enable the secure and consistent collection and reporting of key performance metrics for all students in all institutions across the country. Doing so will provide the information necessary to improve the capacity and productivity of the higher education system to generate more high-quality, affordable, career-relevant credentials, particularly for low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults.

Improving postsecondary data and data systems will require upgrading institutional, state, and national systems and reinforcing the necessary linkages between them to create secure and useful information feedback loops for key constituencies in higher education, among them students, educators, policymakers, employers, and the public. Work underway by partners includes advocating for and supporting the implementation of policies and practices to:

- **Increase the data capacity of institutions** to integrate their own systems across the campus using state-of-the-art technology to promote greater use of data to guide academic and fiscal decision-making by leaders, faculty, and staff, enable more efficient reporting to state and national entities, and frame meaningful state-level goals for postsecondary attainment.  

- **Continue to develop robust state data systems** that connect disparate higher education systems within and across states, including non-public institutions, and improve linkages between higher education, K-12, and workforce data to facilitate the timely and safe exchange of data for decision-making by educators and policymakers.

- **Develop a comprehensive national data system or exchange** that would expand coverage and quality by collecting a key set of performance metrics for all students in all institutions. Such a system or exchange would also alleviate reporting burden and reduce duplication by leveraging existing state and national data collections and would require revising data privacy and security protocols to ensure compliance with state and federal laws, as well as accepted standards and practices in the field. Options range from improving IPEDS to creating a federal student-level data system.

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6 Tyton Partners, *Driving Toward a Degree: The Evolution of Planning and Advising in Higher Education* (2015); and Community College Research Center (CCRC), *How Colleges Use Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success (iPASS) to Transform Student Support* (2016).

7 For an example, see the State Blueprint from the Workforce Data Quality Campaign (2016).

A coherent and comprehensive national data strategy should aim to clearly articulate the purposes, use cases, and users of each system and support the necessary connections between them to increase coverage and quality, reduce duplication and burden, and ensure privacy and security. The work ahead is not without challenges, but the lessons learned from a decade of experience provides a strong foundation for advancing and accelerating efforts to improve postsecondary data that will better support college students from access to attainment and promote greater equity of educational opportunity.

**Measuring What Matters / Postsecondary Data Collaborative**

The Postsecondary Data Collaborative (PostsecData) is working to build consensus and support action to advance an advocacy agenda to improve postsecondary data and systems at the federal and state levels. The collaborative, comprised of more than three dozen stakeholder organizations, has developed recommended solutions and provided technical assistance on issues such as improving the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS), and the federal College Scorecard, among others.

The group complements and supports the work of the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) and the Workforce Data Quality Campaign (WDQC) to develop strong data systems that span from pre-K to the workforce. For more information or to join the initiative, visit: [http://www.ihep.org/postsecdata](http://www.ihep.org/postsecdata)

**Envisioning the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure in the 21st Century / Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)**

Maintaining the privacy and security of students’ personal information is a critical element of efforts to improve postsecondary data systems. As a result, IHEP’s 2016 paper series detailing options for improving postsecondary data infrastructure includes an assessment of how policymakers can develop effective data systems while protecting students’ sensitive information. [Understanding Information Security and Privacy in Postsecondary Data Systems](https://www.ihep.org/postsecdata), authored by Joanna Grama, Director of Cybersecurity at Educause, lays out the existing legal framework that protects personal information in government data systems and makes recommendations to guide policymakers as they consider improvements to data systems.
Finance and Financial Aid

GOAL

Advance postsecondary finance and financial aid approaches designed to close persistent participation, progression, and completion gaps, especially for low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults.

- **Federal**: Priorities here include simplifying the aid application process and the formula for determining aid eligibility, as well as developing and/or revising programs with an eye toward targeting of aid resources to students with the greatest need and increasing their participation in these programs. The programs should include robust institutional and student incentives for persistence and completion.

- **State**: Priorities here include assisting states in reviewing and revising their funding models to promote greater access and success for historically underserved groups (low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults) and improving the structure of student aid programs and policies to account for the changing needs of today’s students.

BACKGROUND

College affordability is far and away the leading higher education issue on Americans’ minds, reaching from family dinner tables to the halls of Congress. Amid record levels of student debt, sluggish state revenues, and stagnant outcomes, policymakers and campus leaders are increasingly turning their attention to the question of how higher education is funded (both institutional and student aid) and what can be done to make it more efficient and effective. Proposals run the gamut, from free and debt-free college to tuition caps.

Public funding—state appropriations and federal aid to students and institutions—represents nearly half of the revenue in postsecondary education, making it a powerful lever for not only ensuring student access, but also for promoting student success and attainment of valuable credentials that will enhance opportunity. While the foundation recognizes the pressure affordability concerns place on all students and families, our mission and values compel us to prioritize low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults, who have historically faced the highest hurdles to access and success and without whom we cannot meet our collective attainment goals.

On the front end of the postsecondary journey, students and families continue to struggle with making informed decisions due to the complexities of the current federal aid application process and formula, impacting the decision to apply for aid or even attend college (see *Navigating the Financial Aid Maze*, below). Even when students successfully navigate this complicated maze, there may not be sufficient resources on the other side, as the federal government, states, and institutions struggle to keep their aid programs solvent and ensure that program eligibility guidelines meet the needs of a rapidly changing student population.

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NAVIGATING THE FINANCIAL AID MAZE

TODAY, EARNING A POSTSECONDARY DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE IS CRITICAL TO GETTING A SUSTAINING JOB. FIXING FAFSA—the application that millions of students fill out to apply for aid—will help more students get their credentials and will help our economy.

1 Too Many

- Of the more than 100 questions, only 30 percent are needed by most students.
- Thirty of the questions are used less than 1 percent of the time.

2 Too Complex

- Many questions are outdated, rarely used, or unrelated to the amount of aid a student receives.
- The government already has most of the information from tax returns.

3 Too Late

- Students often do not find out their financial aid packages until months after they have applied to college.

RESULT

FAFSA Holds Us Back

- Every year, 2 million eligible students don’t apply.

Students who mistakenly believe they won’t receive aid don’t plan for college because they don’t think it’s possible, or they only enroll part-time—lowering their chances of graduating.
The story is equally concerning on the other end of the pipeline. Historically, most funding policies have provided strong incentives for enrollment but weak to no incentives for persistence, graduation, or employment. While many states have attempted over the years to link funding to performance on input and outcome measures, early performance funding models suffered from shortcomings such as inappropriate measures, minimal funding tied to performance, and a lack of attention to institutional capacity and variations in institutional mission and student population. Similar challenges apply to federal financial aid programs that rely on metrics designed for students, institutions, and missions from a different era, such as cohort default rates and satisfactory academic progress.

PROGRESS

Federal and state policy conversations in this area continue to build on advances in recent years.

Aid simplification is one area of notable progress. In 2016, the Obama Administration took executive action to simplify the aid application process with the aim of providing students and families with greater and timelier information to make critical decisions; the task now is to ensure that this measure is implemented in a way that truly benefits students. Additionally, proposals to further simplify the process and eligibility formula continue to gain bipartisan momentum and increase in their maturity with the release of detailed blueprints by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), the Urban Institute, and the foundation. Moreover, discussions of tying aid to meaningful outcomes are becoming more commonplace in policy circles, informed in part by research and analysis stemming from the Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) project and through ongoing partner efforts.

Similarly, there has been evolution in the area of outcome-based funding, as two-thirds of the states are developing and/or funding models that link some portion of funding to institutional performance on key indicators. A number of the newer models clearly reflect a culture of policy innovation, incorporating lessons such as the need to include strong measures for serving historically underserved groups and the importance of identifying and working against unintended consequences such as increasing selectivity and weakening program rigor. While research findings on the effectiveness of these policies remain mixed, recent studies have found improvements in completion among states with more robust models (see Unpacking Outcome-Based Funding below).

Even with this progress, there is still a need to better understand the impact of these models on institutional innovation and student outcomes, especially for low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults. This knowledge needs to be developed and broadly disseminated to help states in their efforts to build new models or hone existing ones.

On the student aid front, changing demographics and workforce needs are increasingly forcing states to look at the structure and function of their programs. For example, California and Georgia have made significant modifications to existing programs and have created new

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programs to serve older students and students preparing for careers in high-demand fields. As with outcome-based funding, there is a need to gauge the impact of these changes on access and attainment.

THE WORK AHEAD

The foundation is committed to building on previous successes and supporting its partners to ensure that cost is not a barrier to access and success for the new majority of students. Work currently underway includes:

Federal:
- Ensure the switch to “prior-prior year” tax data to facilitate pre-population of a student’s Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is properly implemented and done in a manner that does not reduce the timeframe students and families have to navigate the college application and commitment process.
- Advocate for an approach to simplifying the federal aid eligibility formula that minimizes application burden while still providing a sufficient amount of information for states and institutions to reasonably assess a student’s financial need and appropriately award aid.
- Support the adoption of well-designed federal aid benefits such as year-round Pell Grants and income-based repayment to increase their uptake by financially needy students and to better target aid resources toward their benefit.
- Raise awareness and knowledge on the issue of embedding financial incentives in existing and new funding streams with an eye toward improving outcomes, while defining minimal levels of institutional performance and mitigating unintended consequences.

State:
- Advance evidence-based changes in state funding models to align with the goal of increasing attainment of high-quality credentials, especially among low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults, and eliminating attainment gaps.
- Evaluate states adopting new outcome-based funding models to gauge impact on student outcomes and institutional behavior, broadly sharing the insights gained.
- Support states in reviewing and restructuring their student financial aid programs in response to changing fiscal and demographic conditions.
- Develop a better understanding of how the myriad of state, federal, and institutional funding streams might work better in combination to support student needs, and push for improvements in leveraging these streams.

Better aligning federal and state financing streams with the needs of the new majority of college students will not by itself close equity and attainment gaps and meet workforce needs. But it is increasingly clear that efforts to achieve those goals will fall short without this alignment.
Fixing FAFSA

In July 2015, the foundation released *Better for Students: Simplifying the Federal Financial Aid Process*, a blueprint that proposes options for alleviating some of the well-documented challenges with the student aid application process. The foundation worked with a wide range of stakeholders over several months to produce the blueprint, which focuses on three issues:

- **Timing**: The current process does not allow enough time for students and families to make informed decisions. The Obama Administration has taken a step toward addressing this issue by allowing the use of prior-prior year tax information for the FAFSA.
- **Redundancy**: FAFSA asks questions already reported to the IRS. Using existing tools to import tax data into the FAFSA can address this.
- **Complexity**: FAFSA poses more than 30 questions with confusing terminology that apply to less than one percent of all aid recipients. Aid applications and formulas can be better targeted according to the complexity of a student’s financial situation.

Unpacking Outcome-Based Funding / Research for Action (RFA)

*RFA*, a nonprofit education research organization, is currently conducting an in-depth quantitative and qualitative study on the implementation and impact of outcome-based funding in three states: Indiana, Tennessee, and Ohio. Because the study is drawing on student-level data, it is the most rigorous study of this issue to date.

Preliminary findings indicate that in Indiana, the outcome-based funding policy adopted in 2009 has coincided with steady increases on several key indicators, including on-time graduation and graduation rates in high-demand areas such as STEM. Additionally, outcomes for students receiving Pell Grants increased at a greater rate than did outcomes for non-Pell Grant students. Detailed findings will be released in the coming months. For more information, visit [https://www.researchforaction.org/projects/examining-outcomes-based-funding/](https://www.researchforaction.org/projects/examining-outcomes-based-funding/)
Student-Centered Pathways

GOALS

Advance a four-part pathways framework—an integrated, institution-wide approach to student success—across institutions and states.

- **Remediation**: Replace remedial education models that have been proven not to work with evidence-backed approaches.

- **Technology-Enabled Advising**: Remove barriers and create incentives for integrating advising systems campus-wide.

- **Digital Learning**: Remove barriers that prevent the implementation and expansion of online and blended courses, especially in areas of high student attrition.

- **Transfer and Articulation**: Create more efficient paths to a credential by eliminating the loss of transfer credits.

BACKGROUND

For too many students, the road to and through college is anything but clear, and is filled with detours and off-ramps. Nearly two-thirds of incoming students are deemed underprepared for college-level work and land in remedial courses from which a significant proportion do not emerge, according to the [Community College Research Center](https://www3.ccri.edu/). Moreover, the traditional “cafeteria model” of presenting courses and programs leaves students—especially low-income and first-generation students—without clear paths to meet their goals. While evidence-based solutions are emerging to address these needs, demand is quickly rising for a way to integrate these promising solutions at scale across institutions (see [Navigating the Path to a Credential](https://www.navigatingthepath.org), below).

The pathways framework represents an integrated, institution-wide approach to student success based on intentionally designed, clear, and structured educational experiences, and informed by available evidence, that guides each student effectively and efficiently from her/his point of entry through to attainment of high-quality credentials of value in the labor market. Institutions committing to this framework are redesigning their programs by: helping students get on a path (remediation); keeping students on a path (technology-enabled advising); ensuring that students are learning along their path (digital learning); and creating clear curricular paths (transfer).
There are several ways that the pathways framework is being deployed in the field, but all share four core elements that are the focus of foundation efforts:

1. **Remediation.** Traditional remediation models are ineffective at supporting student persistence and completion. Nearly 40 percent of remedial students in community colleges never complete their remedial courses, and, of those who do, only 25 percent complete a gateway college-level course. Only 10 percent of community college students assigned to remedial courses complete a degree within three years, and only slightly more than one-third of students in remedial education at four-year institutions complete a bachelor’s degree within six years.\(^{11}\) Newer approaches, such as co-requisite and accelerated remediation, are showing promising results.

2. **Technology-Enabled Advising.** Research indicates that students who succeed tend to select their major early and make steady progress toward completion when they understand the requirements for a credential and the best route to that credential.\(^{12}\) Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success (iPASS) uses the tools of predictive analytics—including notifications and interventions—to enhance degree planning, advising/counseling, and early alerts. Relying on accurate and timely data, iPASS coordinates the functions of various systems, including degree audit/progress tracking, course recommendations, and advising management to keep learners on track to completing their credential.

3. **Digital Learning.** Many low-income and first-generation students face the hurdle of passing introductory general education courses offered in large lecture halls with hundreds of students. Research shows that powerful new teaching and learning tools can help educators tailor content to reflect students’ strengths and needs. These include courseware that

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\(^{12}\) Community College Research Center, *What We Know About Guided Pathways* (2015).
combines online and on-site content, adapts content to students’ competencies, and uses “emporium-style” technology that promotes active and collaborative learning.\textsuperscript{13}

4. **Transfer and Articulation.** One-third of today’s students attend more than one institution on their way to a credential, but for many of these students, the knowledge and skills gained through years of work are not creditable, credits earned are not easily transferable, and when credits do transfer, often they are counted as electives rather than major/degree program credits. The result for many is wasted time, wasted credits, and wasted money, sometimes with no credential to show for it. Improvements in this area are urgently needed.

**PROGRESS**

Evidence that integrated advising, reformed remediation, and digital learning can significantly contribute to student success is growing, as is demand for these solutions. At the same time, there is a growing body of research documenting the shortcomings of transfer and articulation practices and identifying ways to address them.

**Remediation.** Field consensus is growing on what “good” looks like for remediation, aided by the 2015 release of *Core Principles for Designing Remediation within a Comprehensive Student Success Strategy*. Many states have changed their placement practices in a range of ways, including eliminating mandatory placement assessment (Florida), developing uniform statewide cut scores combined with high school GPA (North Carolina), and creating aligned definitions of college readiness (Texas). Differentiated math pathways are being scaled in Ohio, Texas, and other states, aligning math curriculum to fields of study and removing college-level Algebra as the great barrier to a non-STEM credential. The *New Mathways Project (NMP)* has developed a systemic approach to dramatically increasing the number of students who complete math coursework aligned with their chosen program of study. The popularity of delivering remediation to students while concurrently enrolling them in credit-bearing courses has spread through *Complete College America’s* championing of co-requisite remediation.

**Technology-Enabled Advising.** Two landscape analyses are complete. An initial review conducted by *Educause* revealed that interest in iPASS and its approach to predictive analytics is growing, with 80 percent of institutions expecting to invest in iPASS technologies. A more recently completed landscape analysis by *Tyton Partners* identified a proliferation of companies (now 120, up from 25 three years ago) with fewer than a third offering a comprehensive suite of iPASS applications. A barrier to adoption is the need to cobble together multiple applications from a variety of vendors to achieve full functionality.

**Digital Learning.** A growing body of evidence demonstrates that new technologies can tailor learning at an unprecedented scale. Grantee experience and field research indicates that when students take high-quality blended courses (i.e., a combination of in-class and online courses), they can master the same amount of content in less time.\textsuperscript{14} Through the *Next Generation Courseware Challenge*, the foundation funds high-quality courseware solutions to help low-income students succeed in high-enrollment general education courses, where they often struggle.

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Transfer and Articulation. Research on the disconnect between policy and practice reveals that well-meaning state transfer and articulation policies often break down at the campus level. The most common type of transfer is from a public two-year institution to a four-year institution, a path heavily traveled by new majority students. Across the country, 36 states have a transferable general education core, 16 states have a common course numbering system, and 36 states have a transfer associate degree, yet transfer students lose an average of 13 credits. And nearly half of students who transfer from a community college lose some credits when they transfer.¹⁵

THE WORK AHEAD

Remediation. Despite the progress in understanding what works and what “good” looks like, important obstacles remain. The foundation will focus on policies designed to:

- Align curriculum from high school to higher education, including differentiated math pathways.
- Deliver remediation through research-based methods—co-enrollment, acceleration, just-in-time academic support.
- Place students in credit-bearing course as a first course of action.
- Measure success as completion of gateway courses, not completion of remediation.

Technology-Enabled Advising. The foundation will focus on removing policy barriers to effective implementation and use of iPASS tools in institutions by supporting:

- Education of advisors about the requirements of the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and other relevant federal privacy laws to clarify limitations on data sharing and remove perceived barriers to sharing data across financial aid, advising, and other types of student services. This will enable any advisor or counselor in contact with a student to access a holistic picture of the student’s needs and supports while preserving their privacy rights.
- Elimination of “lowest cost bid” requirement for early-stage technologies. Replace with “best solution” or “best meets needs” rules. This is a relatively new technology and robust iPASS technologies must support several different operations. If institutions must choose the lowest bidder, there is high risk that the technology will fall short of the iPASS promise for improving student success.

Digital Learning. An important policy lever to spread implementation of quality digital learning is the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA). SARA is a voluntary agreement among its member states and U.S. territories that establishes comparable national standards for interstate offerings of postsecondary distance education courses and programs. It is intended to make it easier for students to take online courses offered by institutions based in another state.

¹⁵ Monaghan and Attewell, The Community College Route to the Bachelor’s Degree (2014).
SARA delivers cost savings, streamlines the state authorization process, and makes regulatory mechanisms more consistent, thereby expanding access for students to a variety of educational options.

To date, 40 states and more than 1,000 institutions have joined SARA, and advocates hope that several of the largest states (e.g., California and Florida) will sign on as well. The foundation will continue to support this and related efforts, emphasizing the need to evaluate progress and make adjustments as necessary to ensure value for institutions and students.

Finally, institutions that have the will to innovate often lack the resources. The foundation will monitor efforts at the national and state level to fund innovation within institutions, with a particular focus on assessing their impact and ability to help students achieve their educational goals.

**Transfer and Articulation.** Field understanding of the root causes of broken transfer systems has improved, and efforts to fix the problems face significant challenges. Moving forward, the foundation’s focus will be on:

- Creating and regularly refreshing major-specific program maps that transfer from two-year to four-year institutions as well as across two- and four-year institutions.

- Collecting data and reporting on the number of credits rejected by receiving institutions, as well as transfer rate, post-transfer completion rate, time/credits to credential, and cost of excess credits to credential, by institution.

- Promoting policies that require students to declare their field of interest, major, and preferred transfer destination by the end of their first year, and that they choose a major prior to transfer.

- Requiring easily-accessible, user-friendly, and timely information be made available to students and counselors regarding the transferability of courses.

- Emphasizing fairness in financial aid allocation between native and transfer students.16

The past several years have been a period of significant innovation in creating a more student-centered postsecondary experience. Looking ahead, the challenges will be to continue to strengthen the knowledge base about what works in this area and to provide appropriate policy incentives for their widespread adoption and implementation.

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Cultivating Leaders for Student Success / Jobs for the Future (JFF)

JFF convenes the Policy Leadership Trust for Student Success to support a robust exchange among state and institutional leaders, national expert advisors, and JFF staff on current evidence related to postsecondary completion. The findings and recommendations of the Policy Leadership Trust provide states and institutions with a blueprint for which evidence-backed postsecondary policies, structures, and systems should be implemented. The Trust comprises more than 50 participants from across the country and is organized into four task forces: pathways, developmental education, credit transfer, and outcome-based funding. The task forces are developing policies to support the widespread adoption and implementation of effective innovations.

For more information, please visit http://www.jff.org/initiatives/postsecondary-state-policy/building-pathways-credentials