POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

VISION

At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe that every person deserves the chance to live a healthy, productive life. In the U.S., this means expanding life-changing opportunities, including – and especially – education.

We are working toward a day when many more students achieve a certificate or degree that improves their economic prospects and the chance for educational success no longer depends on race or income. We do this by focusing on innovation, transformation, and policy advocacy.

OUR CHALLENGE

Education after high school – everything from short-term certificates to graduate degrees – is more important than ever to our economy. Nearly all the new jobs in recent years have gone to people with some post-high school education, a trend that will continue. Americans understand that – nearly nine in 10 believe that education and training beyond a high school diploma is essential in today’s economy.

But we cannot meet that demand with the system we have. Today, only about half the students who start their post-high school journey successfully complete it. A white adult is twice as likely as a Latinx adult to have at least an associate’s degree. And a high-income student is five times more likely than a low-income student to have a bachelor’s degree by 24. This is unacceptable and unsustainable. Increasing student success and closing success gaps is an economic and moral imperative.

Innovation

Navigating the path to a certificate or degree can be challenging and costly. Many students come to college with credits from one or more institutions (many of which don’t transfer) or without certain knowledge or skills. Too often these students get stuck in a maze of policies and options, spending money they don’t have on courses they don’t need. And for many, the road ends before graduation. We work with leading colleges and universities to implement innovations that help students identify and get on a path to a credential, stay on that path, and ensure that they are learning along the way.

Transformation

Our work with colleges and universities and the organizations supporting them focuses on transformation – building capacity to dramatically improve student outcomes and eliminate racial and income gaps. This includes having a student-centered mission, using data to make decisions, creating a collaborative environment, setting goals and being accountable for them, and making a commitment to continuous improvement. We engage directly with a diverse group of colleges and universities and intermediaries to support transformation efforts, which are urgently needed to reflect today’s students, meet economic demands, and respond to resource constraints.

Policy Advocacy

Federal and state policies affect who colleges and universities serve and how they serve them. Our policy focus is on finance and financial aid and data and accountability (money and measures) – how public funds are spent to help today’s college students (low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults), and how colleges and universities are measuring and being held accountable for their progress and success.

Find more information at postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org
OUR OPPORTUNITY

A growing number of colleges and universities understand this and have already begun to act. Over the past decade, we have worked with institutions and the organizations supporting them to understand what stands in the way of students achieving their goals and to test new approaches for overcoming those obstacles.

We’ve learned some important things from this work:

• There are “make or break” moments for students on their path to a certificate or degree and having the right information and support can make the difference between moving forward or dropping out.

• Today’s students are more diverse than ever, and colleges and universities need to change to become more “student ready.” Two-thirds of students work while enrolled and one-quarter are parents. Campuses are being challenged to reflect those realities in how they deliver their programs and services.

• Collaboration is key. Higher education is known for competition, on everything from athletics to rankings. But a growing number of colleges and universities are learning that working together to solve shared problems is a more efficient and effective way to boost student success.

THE VALUE OF COLLEGE

Opportunity in America still depends on education after high school and that opportunity is not equal today.
OUR WORK

INNOVATION

Redesigned Remedial Education
Many students enter college without some necessary knowledge and skills, which can keep them from earning a certificate or degree. Remedial courses and programs intended to help students fill these gaps are instead leaving many students further behind, taking classes they don’t need using time and money they don’t have.

New approaches are changing this, placing students in credit-bearing classes with tutoring and support as needed, helping them progress and increasing their chances for graduation. We support these new approaches to remedial education and colleges and universities that have adopted these new approaches are seeing significant increases in pass rates for students.

Improved Student Advising
Navigating the path to a certificate or degree can be challenging and costly, and for many students the road ends before graduation. Students need to know what will and will not keep them on track, particularly low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults, who often face more barriers to graduation.

Technology-enabled advising tools help students create a plan to earn certificates or degrees and to stay on track along the way. They alert faculty and advisors when students are experiencing challenges so that they can provide timely guidance and support that will help keep students enrolled and on the path to a certificate or degree. We focus on improved student advising that takes advantage of information from across the campus and mobile technology to provide better and more timely guidance to students, saving them significant time and money.

High Quality Digital Learning
With more college students working and raising families, online and combined online/in-person courses and programs offer a path to completing education after high school while balancing work and life demands. We support the development of flexible, high-quality digital courses and programs that can help students move further, faster toward earning a certificate or degree, saving time and money, as well as building knowledge of how digital learning tools can be used to help students achieve greater success.

Find more information at postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org
TRANSFORMATION

Institutional Partnerships
As the nation faces an urgent need for more educated workers, there is growing pressure for colleges and universities to ensure more students get to and through a degree after high school, against a backdrop of resource constraints. That is why we partner with colleges and universities and organizations supporting them in accelerating their progress, documenting and demonstrating how institutions can change, focusing the field’s attention on progress that is possible.

Our institutional partnerships include the Frontier Set, a select group of 29 colleges and universities, two state systems, and supporting organizations committed to tapping innovation to significantly increase student access and success and eliminating gaps in college attainment by race and income. The institutions, systems and organizations in the Frontier Set work together to ensure more students get through their programs.

POLICY ADVOCACY

Data and Information
Data and information play a crucial role in improving college access, completion, and career readiness. Existing data systems leave us without answers to critical questions that would otherwise allow us to better support students, including progress and graduation rates that count all students, as well as employment and earnings information for graduates. This provides us with an incomplete picture of the path for today’s college students, who are more likely to be part-time, older, from low-income backgrounds and/or communities of color, first in their family to attend college, or attend more than one college.

We are committed to improving the availability, quality, and use of data and information for students, higher education leaders and educators, and policymakers to make decisions that will improve student outcomes at an affordable cost.

Finance and Financial Aid
College affordability is an issue of concern to students, policymakers, and taxpayers. When it comes to financial aid, our focus is on the students who are most at risk of not enrolling or graduating. Much more can be done to make existing financial aid easier for students to access. Every year, around 2 million students who are eligible for financial aid don’t apply, largely because the process is so complicated. And less than one-third of the neediest first-year college students coming from high school take advantage of federal financial aid to pay for college.

We engage with leaders at the state and federal levels to help improve the process of applying for financial aid, as well as ensuring that financial aid programs include working adults and provide flexibility for students studying year-round or in short-term programs. Our foundation’s priorities for improving federal student aid include: simplifying the processes of applying for and awarding aid, ensuring aid dollars are targeted to students with the greatest need, and making sure financial aid programs encourage enrollment, student persistence, and program completion.

For more information about our work in postsecondary education, please visit postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org.

Find more information at postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org