

Quick Definition

Postsecondary success refers to completion of a postsecondary credential. Often regarded as referring to bachelor's and associate's degrees, postsecondary credential encompasses a broader range of programs that students may complete after high school. These include certificates, diplomas, apprenticeships, licenses and workforce readiness certifications.

Postsecondary education and training has become a necessity for all young Georgians. By 2020, 60 percent of jobs in Georgia will require a postsecondary degree or certification, but only 42 percent of young adults have either today.¹ Closing this gap requires 250,000 more students to complete postsecondary programs over the next eight years. Yet many students who enter Georgia's colleges and universities do not finish their programs. At some institutions, the majority of students never do. Reversing this pattern of dropping out is essential for these young people to have full economic opportunities and for Georgia to have a more competitive workforce.

¹ University System of Georgia, Technical College System of Georgia. (2011). "Complete College Georgia: Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan 2012." Retrieved June 12, 2012, from http://www.usg.edu/educational_access/documents/GaHigherEducationCompletionPlan2012.pdf.

Relevancy to Georgia

For many years a postsecondary credential was not needed to get a job that paid a middle-class income. The U.S. economy was driven by a large manufacturing sector that paid high wages. That has changed. Today's evolving economy is shaped instead by industries that rely on knowledge, skill and adaptability. Now a postsecondary credential is necessary to get a job and reach the middle-class.

Many young people in Georgia recognize this. The college enrollment rate among recent high school graduates is 72 percent, which is higher than in many other states.² In addition, the number of students in postsecondary institutions has soared over the last decade. Enrollment in the University System of Georgia grew by 36 percent between 2002 and 2011 from 233,098 to 318,027.³ However a significant proportion of these students will not finish the programs they begin at these institutions. Over 40 percent of students who enroll in bachelor's degree programs in the University System of Georgia do not graduate, nor do 80 percent of those who enroll in two-year institutions. Improving postsecondary completion is increasingly urgent.

A closer look at the six-year graduation rate at institutions across the University System of Georgia reveals significant differences between them. The System's overall graduation rate is 57 percent, but the rate of individual institutions ranges from a high of 84.8 at the University of Georgia to a low of 20.4 percent at Dalton State College. At 13 institutions fewer than half of first-time freshmen graduate in six years. Table 1 presents the graduation rate for four-year institutions in the system.⁴

² Collins, C. (2010). "Measuring Success by Degrees: The Status of College Completion in SREB States." Retrieved June 24, 2012, from http://publications.sreb.org/2010/10E13_Measuring_Success.pdf.

³ University System of Georgia (2011). "Ten Year Enrollment Report: Fall 2011." Retrieved September 9, 2012 from http://www.usg.edu/research/documents/enrollment_reports/rpt02-11.pdf

⁴ University System of Georgia (2012). "USG by the Numbers." Retrieved June 28, 2012, from https://app.usg.edu/portal/page/portal/USG123_10G.

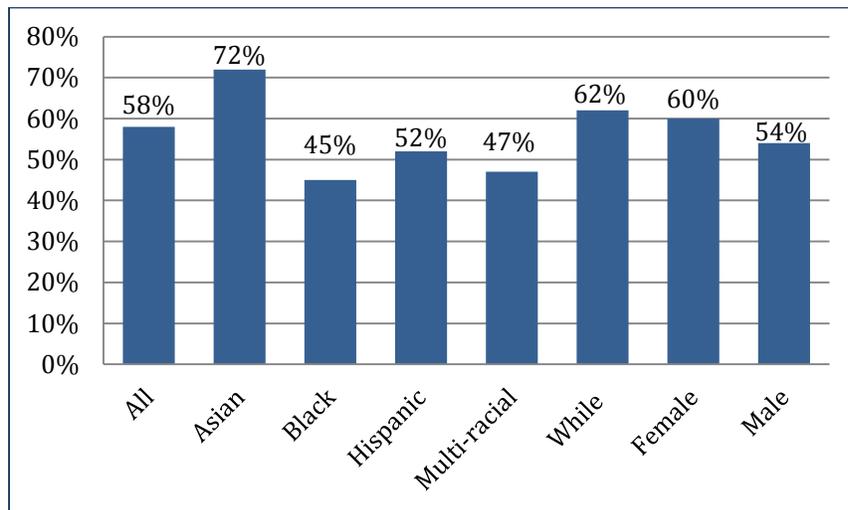
Table 1: Six-Year Graduation Rate, First-Time Freshmen Fall 2005 Cohort

<i>Research Universities</i>	
Georgia Institute of Technology	80.8
Georgia State University	54.6
University of Georgia	84.8
<i>Regional Universities</i>	
Georgia Southern University	58.3
Valdosta State University	54.4
<i>State Universities</i>	
Albany State University	45.6
Armstrong Atlantic State University	37.5
Augusta State University	29.3
Clayton State University	31.8
Columbus State University	35.4
Fort Valley State University	35.9
Georgia College & State University	70.4
Georgia Southwestern State University	41.1
Kennesaw State University	47.8
North Georgia College & State University	58.6
Savannah State University	34.5
Southern Polytechnic University	44.9
University of West Georgia	46.2
<i>State Colleges</i>	
Dalton State College	20.4
Macon State College	24.7
System Total	57.8

There are also differences in the graduation rate of different groups of students. Some students are more likely to complete a postsecondary program than others as Figure 1 indicates.⁵

⁵ Ibid.

Figure 1: Six-Year USG Graduation Rate, First-Time Freshmen, Fall 2005 Cohort



An even smaller proportion of students who enter associate's degree programs complete them. Twenty percent of students who enter associate's degree programs in the Technical College System of Georgia complete them in three years while 11 percent of those who enter University System associate's degree programs do so.⁶

These numbers have captured the attention of the state's political and educational leaders. In 2011 Complete College Georgia was launched. It is a statewide initiative that has brought the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia together to add 250,000 college graduates by 2020 beyond the current completion rates. It is part of a larger effort, Complete College America, which seeks to improve postsecondary completion rates nationally. In Georgia the two postsecondary systems have developed strategies aimed at improving completion rates. Two key focus areas are strengthening remedial courses and shortening time to degree. Placement in remedial courses and extended time in a program are risk factors for not finishing a degree or certificate.

Remediation

Students who enter without adequate preparation are required to enroll in remedial courses, which do not count toward a certification or degree program. These students have lower graduation rates than those who do not require remediation. Students who enter bachelor's degree programs in the University System and take remedial courses have a six-year graduation rate of 24 percent. Those who enroll in associate degree programs and receive remediation in both the University System and the Technical College System have a three-year graduation rate of 7 percent. The implications of this ripple across both systems given the number of students

⁶ University System of Georgia, Technical College System of Georgia. (2011). "Complete College Georgia: Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan 2012." Retrieved June 12, 2012, from http://www.usg.edu/educational_access/documents/GaHigherEducationCompletionPlan2012.pdf.

who require remediation: 59 percent of students entering the University System's two-year colleges and 48 percent of those entering its state colleges require remediation as do 26 percent of students entering the Technical College System.⁷

The two systems are working to improve remediation. The University System will take the following steps:

- Modularize remedial courses
- Create alternate paths for students who are significantly behind
- Develop options for students to work at their own pace
- Integrate support to teach success skills.⁸

The Technical College System has redesigned its remedial courses in English, math and reading. It is also developing new assessment tools to identify students' specific learning needs. Both systems are piloting their efforts and will expand them.

Reducing Time to Degree

Students who progress slowly toward a degree are more likely to drop out.⁹ One approach to helping students move expeditiously toward program completion is facilitating transfers through articulation agreements and providing timely information about transfer options. A second strategy is allowing students to earn credit for knowledge they have gained in other settings.

Facilitating Transfers

Students are increasingly mobile, transferring from one institution to another during their course of postsecondary study. Nationally 41 percent of community college students transfer to four-year institutions.¹⁰ In Georgia, over half of students who earn bachelor's degrees attended more than one institution, and 29 percent of them were previously enrolled in two-year colleges.^{11 12} With this level of mobility, ensuring that students can move between institutions without losing credit toward degrees or certification is vital. The University System and the Technical College System are moving forward with several efforts to ensure that transferring does not end up knocking students out of the postsecondary pipeline.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Complete College America (2011). "Time is the Enemy." Retrieved June 18, 2012, from http://www.completecollege.org/docs/Time_Is_the_Enemy_Summary.pdf.

¹⁰ University System of Georgia, Technical College System of Georgia. (2011). "Complete College Georgia: Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan 2012." Retrieved June 12, 2012, from http://www.usg.edu/educational_access/documents/GaHigherEducationCompletionPlan2012.pdf

¹¹ University System of Georgia GAtracs: Smoothing the Transfer Path. Atlanta, Georgia.

¹² National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2012). "Snapshot Report: Mobility." Retrieved June 19, 2012, from <http://www.studentclearinghouse.info/snapshot/docs/SnapshotReport6-TwoYearContributions.pdf>.

The University System has comprehensive articulation agreements in place that guarantee transfer of general education courses between its institutions. However many students move between institutions in the University System and the Technical College System. Until recently these students had no guarantee that courses they took in one system would be transferable to programs in the other. In January 2012 the two systems took steps to change that. They instituted an articulation agreement that assures that ten general education courses can be transferred between both systems.¹³ They also created a process for continued review of additional courses that may be appropriate for transfer credit.

Another effort to facilitate transferring credit hours is GATRACS, the Georgia Transfer and Articulation Cooperative Services. GATRACS is a collaborative undertaking of both postsecondary systems, the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Student Finance Commission. It is a web portal housed within GACollege411.com that enables students to submit their courses and grades and determine which institutions will accept credit for these courses.

Prior Learning Assessments

Prior learning assessments are a way for students to earn credit for knowledge they have gained outside of postsecondary institutions including workplace training and other experiences. Both postsecondary systems have committed to expanding the use of these assessments including increasing the number of credits earned through them by 20 percent.¹⁴

In September 2012 each institution in the University System as well as the Technical College System released plans to meet the goal of an additional 250,000 program completers by 2020. While institutional plans vary, they address common elements. Within the University System, these elements are:

- Collaborative engagement with campus and community stakeholders
- Collection and analysis of data to facilitate an introspective process to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and the needs of regions and populations served.
- Alignment and partnerships with K-12 for college readiness
- Improved access and graduation for all students
- Shortened time to degree
- Restructured instruction and learning
- Transformation of remediation¹⁵

¹³ University System of Georgia, Technical College System of Georgia (2011). "Complete College Georgia: Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan 2012." Retrieved June 12, 2012, from http://www.usg.edu/educational_access/documents/GaHigherEducationCompletionPlan2012.pdf.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ University System of Georgia. "Complete College Georgia: University System of Georgia Campus Completion Plans. Retrieved September 11, 2012 from https://www.usg.edu/usgweb/complete_college/USG_Campus_Completion_Plans.pdf

Institutions in the Technical College System have developed plans that address remedial education, degree production and graduation and the graduation rate.¹⁶

These efforts are promising. However they are playing out in a context of significantly reduced resources. According to the Georgia Budget & Policy Institute, state funding per full-time equivalent student in the University System decreased 58 percent when adjusted for inflation between FY 2001 and FY 2012. During the same period, the average increase in tuition and mandatory fees, adjusted for inflation, totaled 92 percent.¹⁷ Since FY 2009, state funding for the University System has been cut by \$450 million. Most of these cuts have been absorbed by the System's teaching program, the costs related to faculty who teach and staff that support them. At the same time, the number of students enrolled in the System steadily increased—67,000 since fall 2005.¹⁸

The Technical College System has endured similar funding cuts and enrollment increases. Between FY 2009 and FY 2012, full-time credit enrollment in the Technical College System increased 32 percent, from 81,000 students to 107,000 students. At the same time, state funding per credit hour in the System fell by 26 percent.¹⁹

In this environment there may be significant challenges in taking the policies and practices outlined in the Complete College Georgia plan as well as other efforts to bolster the quality of public education across the P-16 continuum to scale.

¹⁶ Technical College System of Georgia. "Complete College Georgia: Improvement Plans 2012." Retrieved September 11, 2012 from https://www.usg.edu/usgweb/complete_college/TCSG_CCG_Improveplans_Final.pdf

¹⁷ Johnson, C. D. (2012). "FY 2013 Budget Analysis: Higher Education." Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <http://gbpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/fy2013-budget-analysis-higher-education-05162012-FINAL1.pdf>.

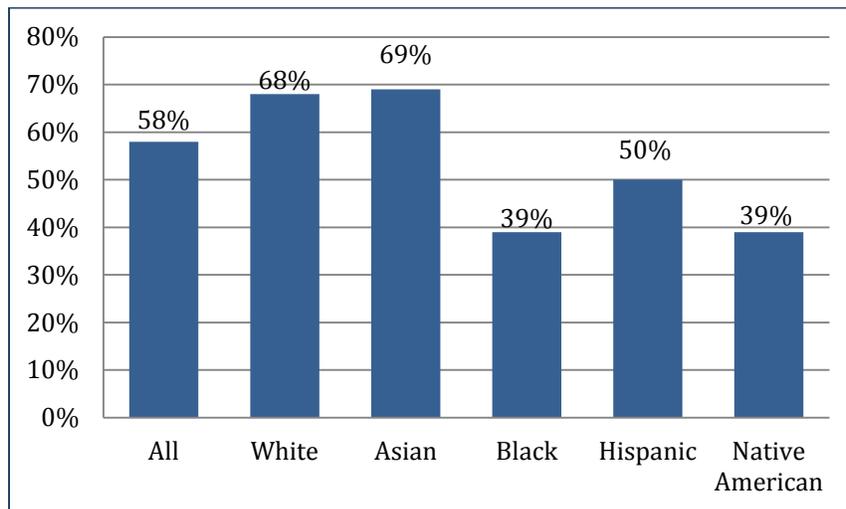
¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The National Perspective

Across the country many students who enroll in postsecondary programs never finish them. Of first-time, full-time students who entered four-year institutions in 2004, 58 percent had completed a bachelor's degree by 2010.²⁰ Among first-time, full-time students who enrolled in two-year institutions in 2007, 30 percent had completed a certificate or associate's degree by 2010.²¹ In addition, there are significant disparities between different groups of students. Some students are much less likely to complete a program than others.

Figure 2: 2004 First-time, Full-time Freshmen Six Year Graduation Rate



Compounding the challenge is the persistence of poor completion rates. While enrollment rates have increased, completion rates have remained relatively flat. In 1967 50 percent of students aged 15 to 29 who began college obtained a bachelor's degree; in 2007 that number had climbed to 51.²² Expanding the number and proportion of people in the workforce with postsecondary credentials depends on changing what happens on college campuses, not simply getting more students onto them.

The implications of the nation's poor completion rate are considerable. The United States is slipping in its global economic competitiveness in part because of the postsecondary completion rate. Once a leader in the production of postsecondary credentials, the United States now ranks 16th among industrialized nations in the college completion rate.²³ The United States also ranks

²⁰ National Center for Education Statistics (2012). "The Condition of Education: Postsecondary Graduation Rates." Retrieved June 27, 2012, from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_pgr.asp.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "Top 10 Fast Facts about Postsecondary Education." Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation/pages/postsecondary-fast-facts.aspx>.

²³ Members of the "Rising Above the Gathering Storm" Committee (2010). *Rising Above the Gathering Storm, Revisited: Rapidly Approaching Category 5*. Retrieved July 11, 2012, from <http://www.uic.edu/home/Chancellor/risingabove.pdf>.

27th among developed nations in the proportion of college students who earn undergraduate degrees in science or engineering.²⁴ The growth in postsecondary completion in other nations and the relative decline of the United States has had an impact. In 2009, for example, 51 percent of the patents issued in the United States were to non-U.S. companies, and according to a recent survey, 77 percent of global firms planning to build new research and development facilities will build them in China or India.²⁵

Looking more broadly at economic growth, the United States has historically had an advantage over other nations in producing goods that require a skilled workforce because it expanded secondary and postsecondary education earlier and more rapidly than other nations.²⁶ That advantage is no longer ours. In Korea over 60 percent of 25 to 34 year-olds have a postsecondary credential, for example, and in Canada almost that many do.²⁷ The scarcity of skilled workers is already being felt by companies in the United States. Many companies have often turned to foreign students to meet workforce needs.²⁸ This, though, is a strategy that cannot be sustained in the long-term.

The challenge of improving postsecondary completion rates has captured the attention of the Obama Administration. President Obama has set a goal of returning the U.S. to having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. To support this, the U.S. Department of Education has concentrated on college affordability. As part of the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act (HCERA) of 2010, funding for Pell grants increased by \$40 billion. Also through the HCERA, students who assume loans after July 2014 can cap their repayments at 10 percent of their discretionary income and their loan balances will be forgiven after 20 years if they have made regular payments.

Another effort launched by the administration is the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant program (TAACCCT). The program was created through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. In 2010 \$2 billion was allocated to the TAACCCT through the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act. Distributed over four years through a competitive application process, the funds are for community colleges and other postsecondary institutions that provide education and training programs that can be completed in two years or less.²⁹ The program has four focus areas:

- Accelerate progress for low-skilled and other workers

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ West, M. (2009). "Education and Global Competitiveness: Lessons for the U.S. from International Evidence." Retrieved July 12, 2012, from <http://www.aei.org/files/2011/09/29/West%20paper%2009-19-11.pdf>.

²⁷ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2011). "Education Indicators at a Glance 2011." Retrieved July 10, 2012, from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/2/48631582.pdf>.

²⁸ West, M. (2009). "Education and Global Competitiveness: Lessons for the U.S. from International Evidence." Retrieved July 12, 2012, from <http://www.aei.org/files/2011/09/29/West%20paper%2009-19-11.pdf>.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Labor. "Notice of Availability of Funds and Solicitation of Grant Applications for Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grants Program." ND. Retrieved September 9, 2012 from <http://www.doleta.gov/grants/pdf/SGA-DFA-PY-10-03.pdf>

- Improve retention and achievement rates to reduce time to completion
- Build programs to meet industry needs
- Strengthen online and technology-enabled learning

These efforts by the federal government have brought more resources to students and institutions and have raised awareness of the issue of postsecondary completion. However, much of the activity to improve postsecondary completion rates has been led by the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The Lumina Foundation, the Southern Regional Education Board, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Aspen Institute and the College Board and many others all have initiatives to improve college completion. These organizations are developing, testing and advocating for new policies and practices that will improve college completion. As they do so, they are looking at the structures and core processes of postsecondary education and calling for significant reforms in those areas.

One strategy to improve postsecondary completion that has captured the attention of the Lumina and Gates Foundations as well as others is performance funding. This ties institutions' funding to their success in improving retention and graduation rates. Calls for performance funding are not new. State policymakers have experimented with performance funding for higher education with varying degrees of success and sustainability. Two of the most notable performance funding systems are in Tennessee and Pennsylvania. In both states these systems are credited with positive results. In Pennsylvania, for example, retention and graduation rates have improved as faculty productivity.³⁰ Lawmakers in Massachusetts recently established new accountability requirements for the state's two-year institutions and tying funding to performance.³¹

The Lumina and Gates Foundations are also among the funders of a prominent state-driven effort to improve postsecondary completion rates: Complete College America. Launched in 2009, it has brought together 31 states to work toward significant reforms in postsecondary education. Each state is required to set completion goals and develop action plans to reach them. States also commit to monitoring and reporting out on measures of progress.

³⁰ Harnisch, T. (2011). "Performance-based Funding: A Re-emerging Strategy in Public Higher Education Financing." American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

³¹ Schworm, P. (2012). State Tightens Control of 2-Year Colleges. [Boston Globe](#).

What the Research Tells Us

Some students—low-income, minority and male students—are less likely to finish a postsecondary credential than others. Researchers are looking at the particular characteristics and experiences of these students to gain a better understanding of why they struggle to complete a degree or certificate program.

A recent study found male students are more likely than female students to attend postsecondary institutions part-time and to follow disrupted pathways—they had periods of at least six months in which they did not attend school after initial enrollment.³² This was true at every income level so that even men from upper-income backgrounds were more likely to go part-time or take time off from school than women from similar backgrounds. These are two of the risk factors for dropping out, and they reflect in part differences in preparation. As measured by high school grade point average, men are less prepared for the demands of postsecondary study than women. At the end of their first year in postsecondary institutions, men continue to have lower GPAs than women, another risk factor for non-completion.³³

Low-income students display similar risk factors making them more likely to drop out of college than their middle- and upper-income peers. For example, they are more likely to delay entering a postsecondary institution by a year or more. Students who delay entry are 64 percent less likely to complete a degree than those who enter immediately after graduating from high school.³⁴ Another issue is faculty interaction. Low-income students are less likely to seek out or interact with faculty, yet faculty-student interactions can have a significant influence on whether a student feels connected to an institution and commits to staying there.³⁵

Many minority students confront the same kinds of challenges: delaying entry to postsecondary institutions, attending part-time, working or having family responsibilities. All of these impede students' integration into the academic community and are risk factors for not graduating.³⁶

Student characteristics and behaviors are not the only factor in college completion rates. Some institutions do better than others at supporting students and helping them finish their programs. A recent study by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education found that institutions that had higher than average graduation rates shared a set of practices that fostered retention and completion.³⁷ These include:

³² Ewert, S. (2010). "Male and Female Pathways Through Four-Year Colleges: Disruption and Sex Stratification in Higher Education." *American Educational Research Journal*. 47: 4

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wells, R.S. & Lynch, C. M. (2012). "Delayed College Entry and the Socioeconomic Gap: Examining the Roles of Students Plans, Family Income, Parental Education, and Parental Occupation." *Journal of Higher Education*. 83: 5.

³⁵ Schreiner, L. A., Noel, P., Anderson, E., and Cantwell, L. (2011). "The Impact of Faculty and Staff on High-Risk College Student Persistence." *Journal of College Student Development* 52:3.

³⁶ Arbona, C. and Nora, A. (2007). "The Influence of Academic and Environmental Factors on Hispanic College Degree Attainment." *The Review of Higher Education* 30:3.

³⁷ Engle, J. & O'Brien, C. (2007). *Demography is Not Destiny: Increasing the Graduation Rate of Low-Income College Students at Large Public Universities*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in

- Designated faculty or staff as “first responders” to students’ needs.
- Relatively high levels of student involvement and engagement in campus activities and programs
- Well-developed first-year programs in which student participation is mandatory or high
- Efforts to improve instruction in “gate keeping” introductory courses, particularly in mathematics
- Early warning and advising systems in place to monitor student progress
- Ample academic and social support services
- Special programs for at-risk student populations
- Strong leadership from top administrators who create an institutional culture that promotes student success
- A central person, office or committee that coordinates undergraduate education and/or retention activities across academic and student affairs staff
- An emphasis on using data about retention in the decision-making process

For More Information:

Achieve

<http://www.achieve.org/>

Achieve is a bipartisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work, and citizenship.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation/Pages/default.aspx>

A high school education is not enough to compete in today's global economy. Yet by age 30 most Americans have not earned a college degree or certificate. Our Postsecondary Success Strategy aims to dramatically increase the number of young adults who complete their postsecondary education, setting them up for success in the workplace and in life.

College Board, College Completion Agenda

<http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/college-admission-completion/college-completion-agenda>

The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center was established to help transform education in America. We work to ensure that students from all backgrounds have the opportunity to succeed in college and beyond. We make critical connections between policy, research and real-world practice to develop innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges in education today.

Complete College America

<http://www.completecollege.org/>

Established in 2009, Complete College America is a national nonprofit with a single mission: to work with states to significantly increase the number of Americans with quality career certificates or college degrees and to close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

Jobs for the Future

<http://www.jff.org/>

Jobs for the Future aligns education with today's high-demand careers. With its partners, JFF develops policy solutions and new pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for struggling and low-income populations in America.

Lumina Foundation

<http://www.luminafoundation.org/>

Lumina is committed to enrolling and graduating more students from college. In fact, we are the nation's largest foundation dedicated exclusively to increasing students' access to and success in postsecondary education. Our mission is defined by **Goal 2025**—to increase the percentage of Americans who hold high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025.

New America Foundation, Higher Education Initiative and Postsecondary Policy Institute
<http://newamerica.net/>

The New America Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy institute that invests in new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States.

Southern Regional Education Board
<http://www.sreb.org/>

SREB is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works with 16 member states to improve public pre-K-12 and higher education. Today it is the only regional education compact that works directly with state leaders, schools and educators to improve teaching, learning and student achievement at every level of education.