

*Report of the Commission  
on Access, Admissions and  
Success in Higher Education*

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**Coming to Our Senses:**  
Education and the American Future

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## Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future



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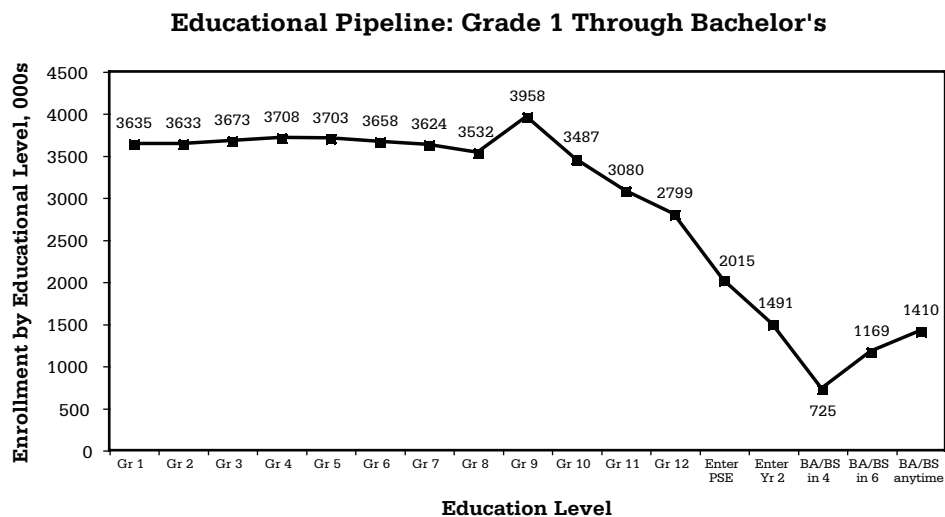
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## Executive Summary

Recent international comparisons contain alarming news for Americans: The United States, which led the world in high school completion rates throughout the 20th century, ranked just 21st out of 27 advanced economies by 2005. And our college completion rates have dropped dramatically — from number two in the world for younger workers (age 25-34) to number 11. The United States is on the verge of losing the great global educational competitive edge it has long enjoyed.

One simple graphic illustrates our educational dilemma. A torrent of American talent and human potential entering the educational pipeline is reduced to a trickle 16 years later as it moves through the K-16 system.



*Merely to reclaim our position in the front rank of international educational leadership, many experts say that the United States must establish and reach a goal of ensuring that by the year 2025 fully 55 percent of young Americans are completing their schooling with a community college degree or higher.<sup>1</sup>*

The commission embraces this ambitious goal. To do so, the commission recommends a 10-part action agenda:

- I. **Provide a program of voluntary preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families** — so that all children at or below 200 percent of the official poverty line enter school ready to learn.
- II. **Improve middle and high school college counseling** — by meeting professional staffing standards for counselors and involving colleges and universities in college planning.
- III. **Implement the best research-based dropout prevention programs** — to identify early those students at risk of dropping out and then provide them with a safety net.
- IV. **Align the K-12 education system with international standards and college admissions expectations** — so that all students are prepared for future college, work and life.

<sup>1</sup> "Second to None in Attainment, Discovery, and Innovation: The National Agenda for Higher Education." State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), *Change Magazine*, September/October, 2008.

- V. **Improve teacher quality and focus on recruitment and retention** — because an educational system can only be as good as its teachers.
- VI. **Clarify and simplify the admissions process** — to encourage more first-generation students to apply.
- VII. **Provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid processes more transparent** — to minimize student debt, and at least keep pace with inflation; make financial aid processes more transparent and predictable; and provide institutions with incentives to enroll and graduate more low-income and first-generation students.
- VIII. **Keep college affordable** — by controlling college costs, using available aid and resources wisely and insisting that state governments meet their obligations for funding higher education.
- IX. **Dramatically increase college completion rates** — by reducing dropouts, easing transfer processes and using “data-based” approaches to improve completion rates at both two- and four-year institutions.
- X. **Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs** — by supplementing existing basic skills training with a new “honors GED,” and through better coordination of existing adult education, veterans benefits, outreach programs and student aid.

To advance this agenda, the College Board has committed itself to preparing and issuing an annual evaluation report tracking national progress toward the goal of 55 percent and on indicators tied to the 10 benchmarks above — and to do this evaluation on a state-by-state basis wherever possible.

This commission understands that these are very difficult economic times. What we need, as columnist Thomas Friedman recently said, is not just a bailout but also a buildup. The economic, democratic and social health of the United States depends largely on an educated citizenry and their productivity. In the past, the best American leaders have understood that even when the United States was indebted and practically on its knees, it had to look to the future, confident that its people, properly educated, would preserve the dream that is America for the rest of the world. Today’s leaders must do no less.

## Preface

For nearly a decade, the College Board has been redefining itself into a “gateway,” a force encouraging students to aspire to college enrollment and success. In this transformation, the College Board has emphasized a three-part agenda of access, equity and excellence, and supported a number of activities that combine to create a comprehensive approach to all three goals (see below).

This report from the Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education is, in many ways, the capstone of these efforts. I am grateful to William “Brit” Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, for his leadership in this undertaking. I appreciate the hard work of the commission members and its staff.

“Coming to Our Senses” defines a clear and ambitious goal of ensuring that at least 55 percent of Americans hold a postsecondary credential by 2025. We can attain that goal by increasing current completion rates by 1 percent annually. This document describes in clear and unvarnished terms the ways in which our K-12 and academic systems have stood by as large numbers of students dropped out of school, while many others who enrolled in college failed to finish. And it lays out an action agenda to move forward, one that calls on everyone — schools, colleges and universities; parents and students; and state and national leaders — to do their part. A compulsion to excel elsewhere in the world has transformed education globally; it is time we developed that same compulsion.

### **A Comprehensive Examination of Access, Equity and Excellence**

The following are among the activities the College Board has supported in recent years. They combine to create a comprehensive approach to encouraging access, equity and excellence:

#### **The National Commission on Writing**

Beginning in 2003, the Writing Commission began issuing a number of seminal reports, including “The Neglected ‘R,’” to explain why writing is an essential academic skill for all students. Over several years, the commission also issued reports on how public and private employers and colleges and universities perceived the writing competence of today’s students.

#### **Task Force on College Access for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds**

Established by the Trustees of the College Board, the Task Force on College Access for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds issued “The CollegeKeys Compact™: Getting Ready, Getting In, and Getting Through College” in 2007, a document providing detailed guidance to schools and colleges and universities on strategies for getting more low-income students ready for, into and through college.

#### **National Advisory Panel on Teaching**

In 2006, with the assistance of a National Advisory Panel on Teaching, the College Board’s Center for Innovative Thought produced “Teachers and the Uncertain American Future.”

#### **The National Commission on Community Colleges**

This effort was also launched by the Center for Innovative Thought. The commission developed “Winning the Skills Race” in 2008, calling for a Community College Competitiveness Act that would offer access to

two full years of education beyond high school as a new norm for American schooling. The commission's recommendations are currently before Congress.

### **Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century**

For three years, this Task Force, which has served as a major resource to the Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education, has been hard at work developing a statement of beliefs and values to guide the “community” of school counselors and admissions and financial aid professionals. Its report was released in fall 2008, with plans to develop written training materials and training modules to be offered to the community in succeeding years.

### **Rethinking Student Aid**

This project, designed to examine the complexity of student aid with an eye to making it fairer, simpler, more transparent and efficient, produced its final report in September 2008.

The work of each of these efforts is available online at [www.collegeboard.com/advocacy](http://www.collegeboard.com/advocacy).

The commission makes bold recommendations. It calls for support of preschool programs. It insists that the American K-12 system be aligned around international benchmarks of what is required for success in college, work and life. It points out that school counselors need more support and more professional respect. It outlines a new legislative program to provide guidance and mentoring services on campuses serving the largest numbers of low-income and first-generation college students. It asks for new attention to the needs of adult learners. It asks that school, college and university leaders commit themselves to fixing leaks in the educational pipeline, in part by addressing the shortcomings in their own institutions.

On behalf of the College Board, I thank the commission for the contributions it has made to American education with this important document. And I pledge to use these recommendations as a framework for shaping the College Board's future agenda.



Gaston Caperton  
President, The College Board



## Chapter 1:

# A Wake-up Call to the American People and American Educators

It is time America came to its senses. Our nation's dominant position in the world order is at great risk. We still have the capacity to lead. But we need to understand that our future is being determined not simply in places such as Washington, Annapolis, Boise, Montgomery, Phoenix and Sacramento. It is also being shaped by decisions in far-flung capitals of the world, from Beijing and Moscow to New Delhi, Oslo, Ottawa and Tokyo. Across the globe, leaders have put their faith in education. They understand that economic growth rests largely on the quality of a nation's human resources, that national productivity depends on people's skills and educational attainment.

As a phenomenon described by Fareed Zakaria as "the rise of the rest" has developed, many of us have been asleep at the switch. The results are most clearly evident in our educational system, the pad from which the United States launched most of its greatest successes. We have allowed the educational advantages Americans enjoyed for generations to slip away:

- The rate at which students disappear from schools between grades 9 and 10 has tripled in the last 30 years. The loss of students between grades 9 and 10 is the biggest leak in the education pipeline.<sup>2</sup>
- High school graduation rates have fallen from about 77 percent in 1971-72 to 67 percent today.<sup>3</sup>
- The United States, which led the world in high school completion rates throughout most of the 20th century, ranked just 13th by the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

- We rank near the bottom of industrialized countries in completion rates after students have enrolled in college.<sup>5</sup>
- While we are still second among developed nations in the proportion of workers over the age of 55 with a postsecondary credential, we drop to number 11 among younger workers (age 25-34).<sup>6</sup>

As an aging and highly educated workforce retires, for the first time in the history of our country we face the prospect that the educational level of one generation of Americans will not exceed, will not equal, perhaps will not even approach, the level of its parents.

***Merely to reclaim our position in the front rank of international educational leadership, many experts believe we must establish and reach a goal of ensuring that by the year 2025 fully 55 percent of young Americans are completing their schooling with a community college degree or higher.***<sup>7</sup>

Two charts graphically display the challenge facing the United States in reaching such a goal. The first ranks developed nations (members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) by "tertiary" or postsecondary attainment among each nation's oldest citizens and workers.<sup>8</sup>

The chart on the following page reveals that the United States ranks second out of 32 nations in terms of postsecondary attainment for citizens age 55 to 64. Only the Russian Federation has provided more of its citizens with a postsecondary degree.

<sup>2</sup> Walt Haney et al., *The Education Pipeline in the United States, 1970-2000* (Boston: Boston College, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Haney et al., *The Education Pipeline in the United States*.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Schleicher, "Seeing U.S. Education Through the Prism of International Comparisons" (Presentation to the Commission, Chicago, IL, March 6, 2008).

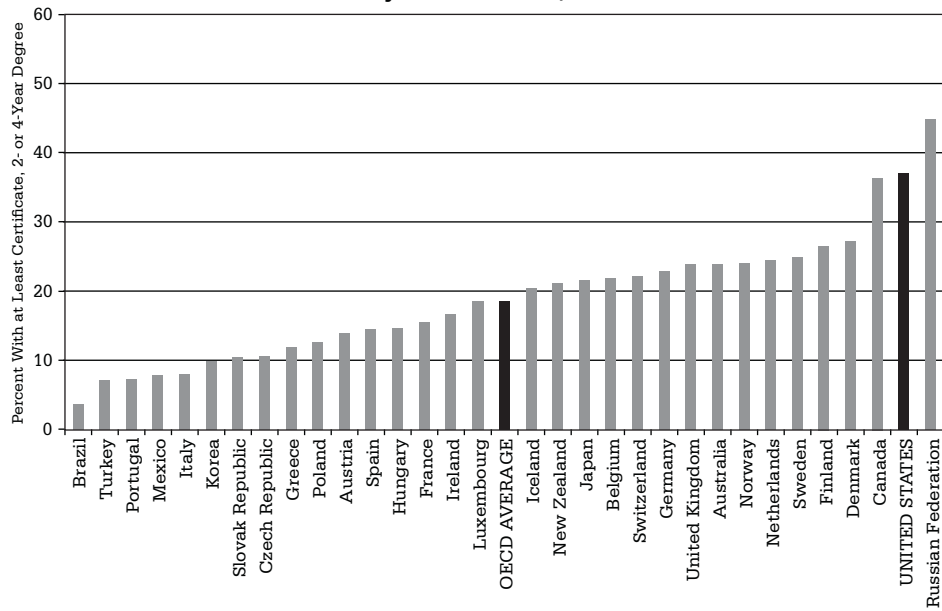
<sup>5</sup> Making Opportunity Affordable, *Adding It Up: State Challenges for Increasing College Access and Success* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *OECD Factbook 2008*.

<sup>7</sup> "Second to None in Attainment, Discovery, and Innovation: The National Agenda for Higher Education." State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), *Change Magazine*, September/October, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> That is to say by attainment of a post-high school certificate or two- or four-year college degree. These are difficult comparisons to make, as a bachelor's degree in the United States, for example, normally requires four years of full-time study, while one in England normally requires three. In some Canadian provinces, a thirteenth year of secondary education required for college entry is considered to be "tertiary," while in the United States a "prep year" to improve college admissions credentials would be considered secondary education. Six- or 12-month certificate programs in the United States would be considered part of postsecondary or tertiary education, but not part of "higher education."

### Postsecondary Attainment, 55- to 64-Year-Olds



Source: OECD 2008

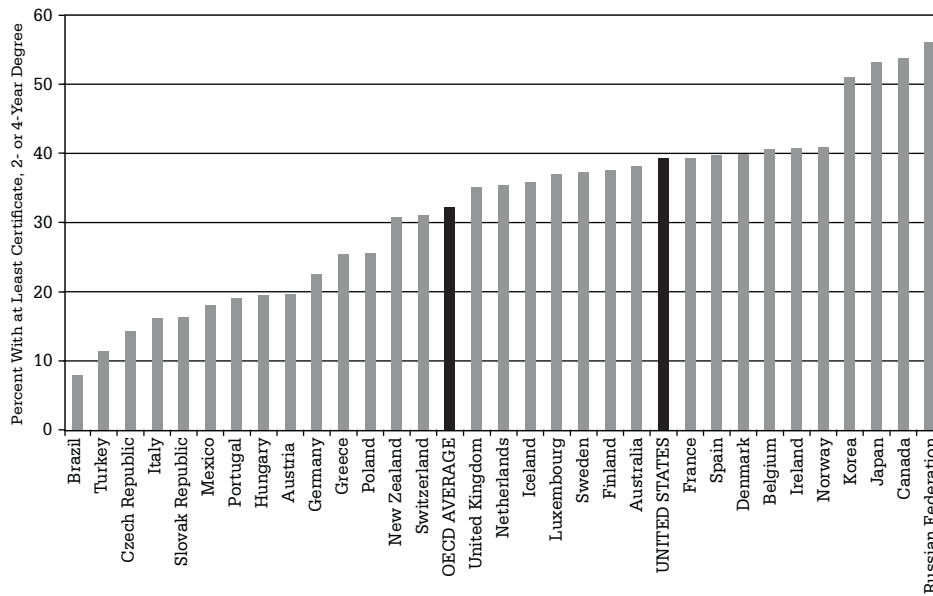
The picture is markedly different for younger Americans. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, the United States slips to 11th out of 32 nations. For this key demographic group, the Russian Federation, Canada, Japan, Korea, Norway, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Spain and France have managed to leap ahead of the United States, while Australia and Finland are close to parity with the United States.

Although the 2025 goal of ensuring that 55 percent of young Americans leave school with a community college degree or higher may seem daunting, the commission believes firmly that this goal sets the right aspiration for our nation. Currently, about 40 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds have attained some type of postsecondary degree or credential. The goal is achievable if Americans are willing to make the necessary investments in higher education access, admission and success. Asian Americans already meet this goal and middle-class white Americans are within striking distance. Therefore, success will require our nation to place much greater attention on the educational success of low-income and underrepresented minority students.

The 55 percent degree attainment goal would be reached if, for example, between now and 2025 the United States increased its postsecondary education productivity by just one percentage point annually. That is to say, by incrementally adding just one percentage point to the annual rate of degree completion in the United States by 2025, 55 percent of young Americans would complete their education with a postsecondary degree.

Working toward this goal and attaining it will enable the United States to maintain the educational underpinnings of American democracy, improve the quality of American life, meet national workforce needs in a global economy and re-establish the United States among international leaders in postsecondary education attainment.

## Postsecondary Attainment, 25- to 34-Year-Olds



Source: OECD 2008

### Changing Demographics

A major part of the challenge lies in erasing disparities in educational attainment so that low-income students and underrepresented minorities can take their place at the table. Just 26 percent of African Americans, 18 percent of Latino and Hispanic Americans, and 24 percent of Native Americans and Pacific Islanders have at least an associate degree. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems estimates that eliminating the degree gap between underrepresented minorities and white Americans would produce more than half the degrees needed to meet the 55 percent goal.<sup>9</sup>

A wait-and-see attitude will only compound the problem. The face of young America is changing dramatically. Demographic projections indicate that the number of high school graduates in the United States will grow by 17 percent between 2000 and 2020.<sup>10</sup> All of that growth will represent students of color. The number of white graduates is expected to decline by about 10 percent, while the number of African American and Native

American students will grow by 3 percent and 7 percent, respectively. The number of Asian American high school graduates will increase slightly, while the number of Hispanic graduates will grow by 54 percent.

Here is what those complicated demographics mean in practical terms: As a declining, aging and well-educated white population approaches retirement, it will be replaced by a growing number of younger minority citizens with lower levels of educational attainment if current degree attainment patterns continue. Individual opportunity will suffer. Economic growth will falter. And America's place in the world will be that much more diminished.

This commission's view is unshakable. We believe that American education is this nation's greatest strength and most powerful force for advancing the common good. At their best, America's schools, colleges and universities create opportunities, build communities and advance the national interest.

<sup>9</sup> NCHEMS estimate included in *Adding It Up*.

<sup>10</sup> Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door* (Boulder: WICHE, 2008).

But if educational institutions are to make the contributions demanded by the times, all of us must address serious challenges in the education system itself, from preschool through college graduation. Current degree attainment patterns are no longer acceptable. We simply cannot create the America we want for tomorrow with the educational system we have today. Transforming that system will require that we address its shortcomings — and fearlessly set out to eliminate its weaknesses.

## Chapter 2: Seven Great Education Challenges

Seven severe, chronic and interrelated obstacles stand between where we are today with our P-16 educational system (prekindergarten through college) and where we need to be tomorrow. They include:

- many poor and minority children arriving at kindergarten educationally well behind their peers;
- high attrition rates at crucial stages of the educational pipeline;
- shortcomings in K-12 student preparation and college readiness and lack of alignment between high school and college;
- disparities in the quality of K-12 teaching;
- significant challenges on our college campuses, including complex admissions and financial aid processes, affordability challenges and disappointing completion rates;
- outdated college credit and transfer practices that inhibit student mobility; and
- inadequate investment in adult education.

### Early Childhood

Although the evidence is overwhelming that investments in high-quality preschool programs provide returns of between two and four dollars to our nation for every dollar invested, just 22 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool programs and the proportion falls to 3 percent for 3-year-olds.<sup>11</sup> While some of these programs are of high quality, including state standards for teacher qualifications and facilities, others are not.

A generation of studies going back to the 1960s demonstrates that low-income children with access to high-quality preschool programs have better life outcomes. They are more ready for school when they enter. They are more successful in school. They are more likely to persist to a diploma. They are more likely to find work, pay taxes, marry and purchase their own homes. And they are less likely to be unemployed, to be on public assistance or to run afoul of the juvenile or adult correctional systems.

### Preschool Programs Work

The benchmark analysis of the benefits of early childhood education programs has long been the Perry Preschool Program. Launched in Ypsilanti, Mich., in 1962 with a matched set of low-income, minority participants and nonparticipants, the effort was tracked over the following decades by researchers at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. All of these African American children, age 3 or 4, lived in poverty. They were assigned to the program at random for two years. A 2004 analysis indicates those in the program derived remarkable benefits from it, while outperforming nonparticipants on academic assessments at ages 5, 9, 14, 19 and 27.

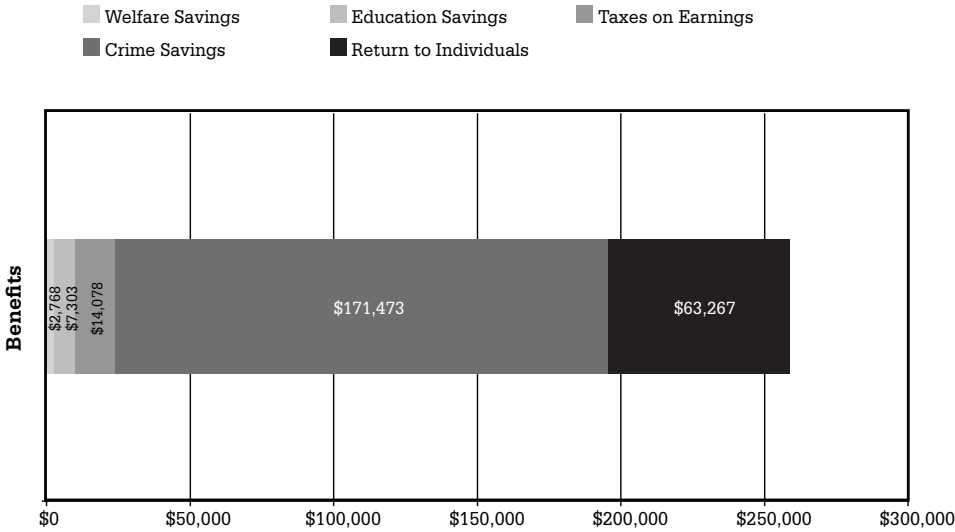
<sup>11</sup> See, for example, National Institute for Early Childhood Research, *The State of Preschool 2007* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 2007); "Preschool Enrollment — Equal Access for All?" *Harvard Education Letter* (July/August 2005); Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow, *The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California* (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, 2005); also Haney et al.

**Selected Findings of the Perry Preschool Study After 40 Years**

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Perry Program</i>	<i>No Perry Program</i>
High school graduate	65%	45%
Earn \$20K or more	60%	40%
Own home	37%	28%
Possess savings account	76%	50%
Own automobile	82%	60%
Arrested five or more times	36%	55%
Monthly earnings at age 27	\$1,219	\$766
Social services at age 27	59%	80%

In a 2005 analysis, the National Institute for Early Education Research reported on a separate study of 2,728 disadvantaged 5-year-olds in five states (Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia). Children in high-quality preschool programs substantially outperformed nonparticipants in readiness tests in vocabulary, print awareness and early mathematics.

**Every \$1 Invested in the Perry Preschool Returned \$17 Over 40 Years to Society and Individuals**



We also know from ethnographic studies in the 1990s that children from upper-income, professional homes have a major head start over their working class and public assistance contemporaries when they start school at age 5. The advantage can be quantified in vocabulary, the basic building block of language and learning. The differences show up at 36 months. A child from a family on public assistance has an average working vocabulary of about 500 words at 3 years of age. Meanwhile, a child in a blue-collar family has an average vocabulary of 750 words (50 percent greater), while the child in a professional family has an average vocabulary of 1,100 words (120 percent greater). At 36 months, the low-income child prepares to enter school some distance behind the educational starting line.

### The K-16 Pipeline

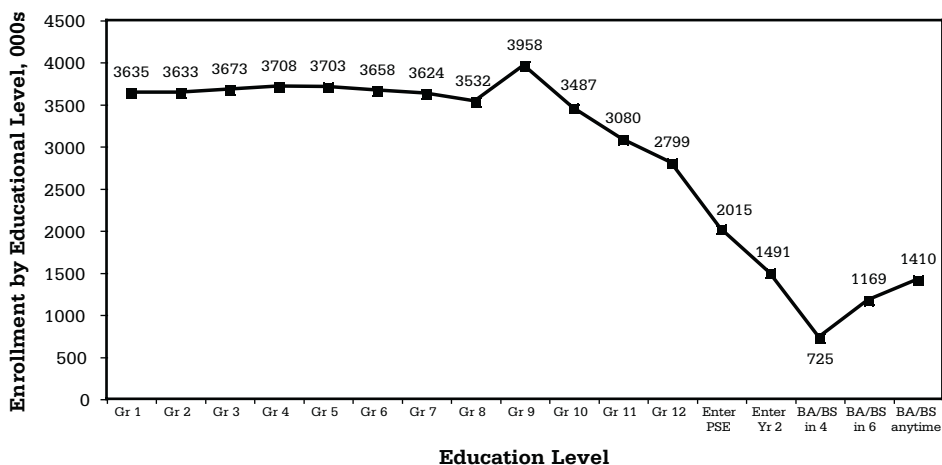
An aggregate picture combining K-12 and higher education attrition rates presents a deeply troubling picture (see figure below). What begins as a great flood of human potential in kindergarten

is reduced to a rivulet of successful college graduates 16 years later. Although data limitations make this pipeline analysis less than ideal, it provides a reasonably good picture of how well American schools and colleges and universities keep students on track for success.<sup>12</sup>

The data indicate that schools do a reasonably good job of keeping students in school through about grade 8 or 9. After that, system performance declines dramatically.

**High School Dropout Rates.** In recent years, critical analyses of high school dropout rates have focused on “a silent epidemic” at “dropout factories” — high schools, mostly in low-income urban and rural areas, where fewer than 60 percent of entering freshmen earn a diploma within four years. According to the Manhattan Institute, the national cohort graduation rate for the class of 1998 was 71 percent. For white students, the rate was 78 percent, while it was 56 percent for African American students and 54 percent for Latino students.<sup>13</sup>

**Educational Pipeline: Grade 1 Through Bachelor's**



<sup>12</sup> Although described by Haney et al. as a “cohort” analysis, the pipeline numbers are not a true cohort. A cohort would track the 3,635,000 students who enrolled in grade 1 until 2,799,000 of them enrolled in grade 12. Instead, the “pipeline” simply displays enrollment at each grade level in the 2000-01 school year. The figure then assumes that all grade 12 enrollees graduated and that 72 percent of them enrolled in postsecondary education. While less than ideal, the figure is a reasonably good approximation of cohort patterns, which are unlikely to change dramatically from year to year.

<sup>13</sup> The increase in the number of students from grades 8 to 9 in the report figure is a consequence of what Haney et al. describe as the ninth-grade “bulge,” which has tripled since 1970; the authors attribute this to more students being “flunked to repeat grade 9.”

The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy at Boston College reports that:

- The rate at which students disappear from schools between grades 9 and 10 has tripled in the last 30 years. The loss of students between grades 9 and 10 is the biggest leak in the educational pipeline.
- Just two out of three young people in the late 1990s were progressing normally from grade 9 to graduation.

**Higher Education.**<sup>14</sup> The situation in higher education is hardly more encouraging. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an association of 30 advanced economies based in Paris, the United States slipped between 1995 and 2005 from second to 11th in university completion ranks. Just 36 percent of first-time, full-time U.S. undergraduates at four-year colleges, who enroll intending to earn a bachelor's degree, attain their goal within four years, according to a June 2008 report from the National Center for Education Statistics.<sup>15</sup> Only 58 percent achieve it within six years.

Dropout rates in the large and complex enterprise that is American higher education vary by institutional selectivity and type. In a small percentage of institutions, 90 percent or more of the students graduate within six years, often less; but another small percentage of institutions graduate less than 10 percent. Private research universities report average graduation rates of 84 percent over six years.<sup>16</sup> For public research universities the average is 60 percent, while public institutions not awarding the doctorate average 37 percent. These averages conceal a lot of variation; some rates obviously are higher and some are lower. It is likely that individual institutions within each of the major categories produce graduation

rates from 10 to 20 percent above or below the group average.

Community college success rates (in terms of degree attainment) are especially sobering: Most estimates indicate that even among students who enroll planning to transfer to a four-year institution, only about 25 percent successfully transfer. Developmental (remedial) courses in two-year colleges seem to be a graveyard for degree aspirations. According to the Lumina Foundation for Education, only about a third of community college students who "attempted the highest level of developmental math, English or reading actually completed that course within a three-year period."<sup>17</sup>

### **Shortcomings in Preparation and Readiness**

The need to increase the rigor of high school programs has been the dominant cry of the school reform movement in the last decade. Much of this effort revolves around improving college planning and counseling, raising graduation requirements, ensuring student access to high-quality courses, narrowing the "achievement gap" and aligning course content with the skills required to succeed in work and higher education.

**Planning and Counseling.** Planning for college must begin early to raise student and family awareness, expectations and aspirations for college. Low-income and first-generation families have access to fewer college admissions and financial aid resources and are less likely to fulfill their postsecondary plans as a result. Most low-income students, understandably, have done very little financial planning for college.

Yet, while plans for college need to start early, many middle school students do not understand that the courses they take in middle school can

<sup>14</sup> Data on higher education drawn from: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, The Education Trust, National Center for Education Statistics, National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and the College Board; and from Sarah E. Turner, "Going to College and Finishing College: Explaining Different Educational Outcomes," in *College Choices: The Economics of Where to Go, When to Go, and How to Pay for It*, ed. Carolyn Hoxby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Drawing on U.S. Department of Education data (Beginning Postsecondary Students), the American Council on Education estimates that between 65 and 75 percent of those who enroll in college ultimately attain a bachelor's degree (Communication to Commission chairman from Terry Hartle, Oct. 17, 2008). The figure applied the midpoint between those estimates (70 percent) to arrive at "BA/BS any time."

<sup>15</sup> Jean Evangelauf, "Report Details Latest Data on Graduation Rates and Student Aid," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 4, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Turner, "Going to College and Finishing College."

<sup>17</sup> Lumina Foundation, "Achieving the Dream."



either open or close the door to attractive college and work opportunities. For example, if students do not take Algebra I by the eighth or ninth grade, they may limit the opportunity to enroll in a four-year college immediately after graduation.

Inadequate access to college counseling during school can be a major impediment. School counselors at private schools spend more than half

their time on college counseling, but public school counselors devote just a quarter of their time on college counseling. Resources for counseling are also limited in many low-income urban and rural areas, requiring some counselors to deal with 1,000 students or more. Model university partnerships have been helpful in these situations (see below), and more of them are needed.

### **University-School-Community Partnerships to Encourage Minority Enrollment**

It has long been known that recruitment strategies that work for traditional middle-class white students are sometimes not as effective for those who are low-income, minority or first-generation college applicants. Institutions interested in reaching beyond traditional applicant pools must be aggressive; capable of thinking “out of the box;” and willing to go to where the students are, find them early and work with these students and their families, through schools as well as through churches and community centers. Effective strategies aim to:

- Send bilingual speakers to Latino schools and communities.
- Attract African American students by seeking the assistance of church leaders and meeting with church groups.
- Find Asian students by recruiting in Korean and Vietnamese community centers.
- Rely on parents and community leaders to carry the message between meetings.

Three years ago, **California State University** decided that increasing the college enrollment of minority and first-generation students required new thinking. The process needed to begin as early as middle school, and it should involve parents as key partners to improve student preparation.

CSU began to work with two programs. The first was **Parents Involved with Quality Education**. CSU provided \$575,000 in funding in 2006 for all 23 CSU campuses to partner with local schools to bring the PIQE program to areas where they did not exist. Founded in 1987, PIQE is a nine-week training program for parents with students in grades K-12. During weekly evening classes, parents learn how to improve their child’s performance in the classroom, enhance the parent-and-child relationship, and map out a strategic plan to get their children enrolled in a college or university.

The second was **Super Sunday**, an annual effort for each of the last three years to reach dozens of African American congregations to talk about college preparation. In 2008, Super Sunday reached 52 African American churches in northern and southern California during February. The CSU team, which includes the system chancellor and campus presidents, appears at church services to offer students, parents and grandparents advice about college preparation, providing information about early college preparation, admission, financial aid and the importance of parent/student partnerships.

**The Ohio State University** completed a similar program on a pilot basis in 2008, working on six nights in six successive weeks, to encourage African American families (with children in the fifth and sixth grades) in the state’s large cities to begin early planning for college. What became apparent during these sessions was that:

- Aspiration for college attendance in minority communities is extremely high.
- African American parents need assurance that if their children follow recommended programs, they will not only be able to enroll in college but will also obtain the financial aid they need.
- These parents insist that the normal sequence of applying for admission and then learning about financial aid is backwards. What Ohio State officials learned was that parents and families need assurances that they can finance the education before they are willing to apply.

In light of these presentations, two conclusions are apparent. First, valuable outreach efforts such as these effectively complement school counseling efforts and promise strong results. Second, the recommendations of the College Board's Rethinking Student Aid project, which aims to encourage greater predictability and transparency in financial aid processes, will be a critical element in supporting minority aspirations for college attendance.

**Curriculum Rigor.** In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education examined its longitudinal databases to follow students who were eighth-graders in 1988, graduated from high school in 1992 and set out to earn a bachelor's degree. Their educational results were tracked using high school and college transcripts through December 2000.<sup>18</sup> Curriculum rigor trumps just about everything else in predicting college success. Among the key findings:

- The academic intensity of high school curriculum is the most important predictor of college success.
- Of students who completed a high school curriculum at the highest levels of academic intensity (which the analysis defined as a core course including three to four years of English, math and science, and IB or Advanced Placement® courses), 95 percent earned a bachelor's degree.
- No ethnic group in America comes close to attending high schools in which a rigorous college-prep curriculum is universally available.<sup>19</sup> Minority students and those from low-income

families have the least access to such a curriculum.

- The combination of getting beyond Algebra II in mathematics and taking three Carnegie units in laboratory sciences (biology, chemistry and physics) is a huge predictor of college success.

**Student Preparation.** The consequences of graduating students without a strong background (and admitting them to two- and four-year colleges with spotty preparation) are severe. The U.S. Department of Education reports that high school graduates in 1992 had a remediation rate of 61.1 percent in community colleges and 25.3 percent at four-year institutions.<sup>20</sup> The Manhattan Institute reports that problems of poor preparation are especially challenging for minority students: Just 9 percent of all college-ready graduates are African American or Hispanic.<sup>21</sup> If students do not have the skills they need to perform well in college on entry, it is hard for them to complete their studies successfully. It is critical for students to take appropriate college-preparatory courses in high school and for these courses to be aligned with the knowledge and skills students need to master college-level work.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford Adelman, *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> According to Adelman (*Toolbox Revisited*): Just 45 percent of Latino students attend a high school offering calculus. For African Americans, the figure is 51 percent; for white students, 59 percent; and for Asian students, 61 percent.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Adelman, *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Greg Forster and Jay P. Greene, *Public High School Graduation and Readiness Rates in the United States*, The Manhattan Institute, Education Working Paper No. 3, September 2003.

## Quality of K-12 Teaching

A genuine and chronic crisis exists in K-12 teaching. It extends across the board and has particular ramifications for the teaching of science and mathematics and the development of the nation's science, technology, engineering and mathematics workforce. It is characterized by high rates of turnover, low salaries and large numbers of middle and high school students being taught by "out of field" teachers in science and mathematics — that is to say, by teachers not qualified to teach their subjects. As Sir Michael Barber, formerly a senior adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain, told the commission, all the best educational systems in the world draw their teachers from the top third of university graduates. American teachers do not meet that standard: Based simply on entering test scores, education majors rank 19th in comparison to the scores of students in the 23 most popular majors.<sup>22</sup>

It is impossible, said Barber, for an educational system to be better than its teachers.

**Turnover.** Year in and year out, about 10 percent of teachers leave the field, giving up on a profession in which the financial rewards are meager and working conditions are frequently unprofessional. In the first five years of teaching, according to a commission chaired by former Gov. James Hunt of North Carolina, fully 46 percent of new teachers leave the classroom. Combined with midcareer changes and retirements, overall attrition exceeds 50 percent every five years for the profession.

**Salaries.** Low salaries undoubtedly contribute to the problem of early teacher attrition (and to the larger challenge of attracting first-rate students into the teaching profession). Beginning starting salaries for engineers, consultants, business and finance specialists, management trainees and sales staff far exceed starting salaries for teachers, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.<sup>23</sup> If consumers respond to market signals, high school and college students get a very

clear signal from the salary data about what the market considers to be important.

**Working Conditions.** In recent surveys conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and in California, many former teachers report that working conditions are another major reason they abandon the classroom.<sup>24</sup> Large proportions in both surveys (in excess of 50 percent) point to bureaucracy, lack of support in the classroom and poor staff morale as explanations for their decision to leave. They complain that facilities are poor, that classes are too large and that the lack of planning time and high workloads make effective teaching impossible.

**A Crisis in Mathematics and Science Teaching.** The dynamics of keeping adequately trained teachers in front of classrooms is especially acute in science and mathematics. One major recent survey from the U.S. Department of Education reveals that in the physical sciences up to 40 percent of middle-school students are taught by out-of-field teachers (with 15 percent in high school). For biology, the figures are 35 percent in middle school and 8 percent in high school, with similar numbers (22 percent and 8 percent, respectively) in mathematics. The Business-Higher Education Forum estimates that to meet STEM teaching needs, the United States needs to produce 280,000 or more new math and science teachers by 2015.<sup>25</sup>

## Challenges in Admissions, Financial Aid and Degree Completion

Here the commission points to a number of challenges and obstacles to success. A complex and opaque admissions process hinders access. Financial barriers present formidable obstacles, particularly for low-income students. And institutions, in general, have done little to assess or improve their own performance or turn around disappointing dropout rates. In the commission's view, higher education has been slow to accept the need for internal assessment of its own performance. Too frequently, academic leaders have

<sup>22</sup> College Board, "2006 College-Bound Seniors: Total Group Profile Report," Table 26, page 17 (New York: The College Board, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> National Association of Colleges and Employers, "Spring 2006 Salary Survey."

<sup>24</sup> K. Futernick, *A Study of Teacher Retention in California* (Sacramento: California State University, Office of the Chancellor, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> B-HEF report.

been focused on input measures, such as grade point averages and standardized test scores of entering students, and have shown little interest in assessing performance to improve output measures, such as learning outcomes or graduation rates.

**Admissions.** According to the College Board's Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century, transition from high school to college has become more difficult and challenging. Complex admissions processes, multiple deadlines, poorly designed communications strategies, and uneven outreach and recruitment efforts complicate the process. These difficulties make the process particularly confusing for students who would be the first in their families to attend college.

**Costs and Financial Aid.** Financial barriers alone prevent nearly one-half of all *college-qualified* low- and moderate-income high school graduates from enrolling in a four-year program of college study.<sup>26</sup> Beyond the barrier of cost is the challenge of timing. Faced with potentially high expenses while in the dark about aid amounts, many first-generation, college-going students are discouraged from applying.

Annually, more than 405,000 students successfully completing a college-prep curriculum and prepared to enter a four-year college will not do so (4.4 million a decade), and 170,000 will attend neither a two- nor four- year college at all, (about 1.7 million a decade).<sup>27</sup> An equally troubling indicator reported by The Education Trust is that high-achieving students (successfully completing Advanced Placement courses) of limited means have about the same chance of attending college

(78 percent) as a low-achieving student from a wealthier background (77 percent).<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, college costs are rising.<sup>29</sup> Over the past decade, published tuition and fees rose at an average rate of 2.9 percent above inflation at private four-year colleges, 4.4 percent at public four-year colleges and 1.5 percent at public two-year institutions. Although financial aid has increased substantially in the last 10 years, the shape and nature of aid has changed; need-based grant assistance has not kept pace with need; and the forms, formulas and timelines involved with obtaining aid "make IRS schedules look like child's play."<sup>30</sup> For undergraduate and graduate students, loans now amount to more than half the financial aid available; within the context of loans, subsidized Stafford loans have dropped from 57 percent of education loans to 34 percent, while unsubsidized loans now account for 20 percent of borrowing.<sup>31</sup>

State and local policies have contributed substantially to tuition increases:

- State funding for higher education reached a 25-year low on a per-capita basis in 2004-05.<sup>32</sup>
- State and local investment per student in higher education in recent years (at \$6,995 per student in 2006) was 4 percent lower in inflation-adjusted dollars than it was in 1985-86.<sup>33</sup>
- In 1981, state appropriations for community colleges accounted for nearly half their revenues; today the proportion is just 38 percent.<sup>34</sup>
- At public four-year institutions, tuition and fees that averaged 57 percent of family income for

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Ficklen and Jeneva E. Stone, eds., "Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America" (Washington, DC: Report of the Advisory Committee on Student Aid, June 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Ficklen and Stone, "Empty Promises."

<sup>28</sup> See Gerald Danette and Kati Haycock, *Engines of Inequality: Diminishing Equity in the Nation's Premier Public Universities*, (Washington: Education Trust, 2007) and National Center on Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education*, 1997, NCES 97-388, Washington: GPO, 1997). "Limited means" in the text refers to students from families in the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes, while "students from a wealthier background" refers to students from families in the top 20 percent of family income. "High achieving" and "low achieving" were quartile rankings of student outcomes on NELS-administered achievement tests, which are not otherwise described.

<sup>29</sup> Sandy Baum and Jennifer Ma, *Trends in College Pricing 2007* (New York: The College Board, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century, *Preserving the Dream of America: An Open Letter to Professionals in Admissions, Financial Aid and Counseling* (New York: The College Board, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Wellman, "Costs, Prices, and Affordability: A Background Paper for the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education" (Washington, DC: Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Sandy Baum and Jennifer Ma, *Trends in College Pricing 2007*.

<sup>34</sup> National Commission on Community Colleges, *Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America's Middle Class: An Action Agenda for Community Colleges*. (New York: The College Board, 2008).

low-income families in 1992 had jumped to 73 percent of their income by 2005.<sup>35</sup>

Equally ominous, in 2006, even before the nation's financial system teetered on the verge of collapse, analysts at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems noted that state higher education budgets faced severe shortfalls through 2013, a consequence of antitax public sentiment and growing budget pressure to finance costly services for an aging population.<sup>36</sup> The combination, reported NCHEMS, is likely to present 44 states with structural shortfalls in the decade ahead.

At public institutions, if state investment goes down, the shortfall must be made up through tuition or other revenue-generating measures, since state disinvestment requires public

institutions to keep pace with inflation, both for the institution's historic share of the cost burden and for the state's shortfall.

**Learning from Student and Institutional Challenges.** A drive toward “data-based decision making” is one of the signature accomplishments of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Most institutions of higher education have little comparable experience monitoring and assessing their own processes. A commitment to what the Lumina Foundation has termed a “culture of evidence” can also help colleges and universities reflect on, and improve, their policies and practice. The evidence seems fairly clear, for example, that when higher education leadership pays attention to dropout rates, institutions are able to develop new and more appropriate metrics to improve accountability.

## A Seven-Step Plan to Lower College Dropout Rates

Examining institutional college graduation rates, researchers at The Education Trust came across a revealing finding: No matter their orientation or mission — national research university, regional research university, master's degree institution, or historically black college or university, public or private — different colleges and universities produced substantially different graduation rates, even while enrolling similar students. The Education Trust examined the phenomenon and identified a seven-step process that lowers college dropout rates:

1. **Look at your data and act.** More higher education decisions should be driven by data. When it is apparent that institutions similar to yours and enrolling similar students are producing different results, it may be time to discard the easy explanations and look for underlying causes on campus. Take student complaints seriously; examine course availability; finish “critical path” analyses that identify “choke points” in curricula and offerings; provide students with online degree audit tools that let them plan degree completion; and make course transfer from elsewhere easier, not harder.
2. **Pay attention to details — especially leading indicators.** Use technology to track student success. Make course attendance mandatory, track absences, meet with students in trouble and track data.
3. **Take on introductory courses.** It's just common sense: If you can get students successfully through year one, their chances of degree completion are much higher. Examine first-year courses. If large numbers or proportions of apparently prepared students are failing, preparation might be the problem, but not necessarily — it could just as easily be a “choke point” of a required course for which not enough sections are provided.
4. **Don't hesitate to make demands.** Mandatory course attendance is a good idea, as is mandatory lab attendance. At one institution, the faculty, reluctant to require lab participation, found success rates dropped every time the mandatory requirement was waived.

<sup>35</sup> National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education* (San Jose: NCPPHE, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Dennis Jones, “State Shortfalls Projected Throughout the Decade” (NCPPHE Policy Alert, February 2003).

5. **Assign clear responsibility for student success.** When everyone is responsible, no one is accountable. At one highly successful institution, a central office works with students in challenged high schools and provides summer transition programs and ongoing support and mentoring once enrolled. That office reports to the vice president for student affairs and the vice president for undergraduate education. These students persist to the second year at higher rates than apparently more highly qualified freshmen.
6. **Insist that presidents step up to the plate.** Institutional leaders have to make sure student success is a priority. Presidents can use the bully pulpit to articulate a vision, insist on data, act strategically and continually “walk the talk.” Without presidential leadership (and follow-through on faculty recommendations), efforts to attack dropout rates falter.
7. **Bring back the “ones you lose.”** More common sense — a lot of students who leave without a degree are close to the finish line. The easiest dropout to graduate is the one who is shy of 10 credits or less. One university identified a universe of 3,000 dropouts with at least 98 credits and a GPA of 2.00 or higher. After tracking down their mailing addresses (relatively easy in the Internet age), the university offered simplified readmission, a degree summary indicating courses required (along with priority enrollment in those courses), and support and counseling. The result: Within a few years, the university could point to 1,800 new alumni and alumnae (including 59 with graduate degrees) and a state impressed with the university’s responsiveness.

As the “seven-step plan” indicates, even similar institutions, with similar enrollments in terms of race, ethnicity and academic selectivity, produce quite remarkably different outcomes. Successful colleges pay attention to graduation rates. They monitor year-to-year change and study the impact of different interventions on student outcomes. They break down the numbers among different student populations and continuously ask themselves how they can improve.<sup>37</sup>

### **Credit and Transfer Policy**

Internationally, European and Asian universities are far ahead of American institutions in the degree to which they have responded to increased student mobility by encouraging study elsewhere and ease of credit transfer. Beginning in 1987, with the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students program (which underwent a series of modifications until it became the Lifelong Learning Program in 2007), the European Union encouraged students to transfer among institutions throughout Europe. In April 2008, OECD convened a meeting of 24 nations (including

many from Europe, along with Japan, China and the Russian Federation) to explore collaboration in higher education, including consideration of quality assurance frameworks around international comparability and the potential of expanding “National Qualifications Frameworks” to guarantee course and program quality.

There is nothing remotely similar in the United States. Credit transfer among American institutions is complex and time consuming, awarded after the fact rather than before and offered only grudgingly in many cases. Although transfer processes can work reasonably smoothly and well, transfer of credit is discouraged as a matter of policy on some campuses.

Articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions, even within the same state, are often hard to find, although as the College Board’s National Commission on Community Colleges noted in 2008, such agreements are “preferable to laborious course-by-course negotiations for credit transfer around the transcripts of individual

<sup>37</sup> K. Carey, “Education Sector Reports,” (April 2008): 8.

students.” This is a challenge of special concern for many minority, first-generation and low-income students, who frequently start out in community colleges. Better transfer pathways between two- and four-year institutions would undoubtedly help close the degree gap.

## Adult Education

The adult education system also requires attention. Fully two-thirds of the national workforce that will be available to the United States in 2020 is already beyond the age range of the traditional K-12 years.<sup>38</sup> The current pool of skilled and unskilled adults is equal to the next 17 years of high school graduating classes.<sup>39</sup> The changing nature of work demands policy attention for the unemployed, for older and displaced workers — especially those who entered the workforce a generation ago when an employee with a high school diploma or less could still earn an income sufficient to support a family.

The issue is a complex one that will demand the best from postsecondary vocational and academic programs:

- The U.S. Department of Labor estimates a shortage of more than 10 million skilled workers in the short term (through 2012) throughout the nation.<sup>40</sup>
- “Middle skill jobs” — those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree — are the neglected opportunities in our educational system, according to recent reports. Qualified, skilled production employees are already in short supply, threatening manufacturers’ ability to increase production and productivity.<sup>41</sup>

- While the fastest-growing occupations in coming years will require a four-year degree, those occupations will not provide most new jobs. About four in five new jobs will require a two-year degree or vocational training and certificates, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>42</sup>

The nation’s success in reaching the 55 percent goal requires that we connect adult learners more directly with postsecondary vocational and academic programs that will lead experienced but out-of-work or displaced adults toward higher-skill and higher-wage employment.<sup>43</sup>

## A Compulsion to Excel

These challenges — the need for more early childhood programs, a pipeline that leaks like a sieve from grade 9 on, lack of college planning and counseling, inadequate secondary school rigor, questions about teacher quality, complex challenges on campus and the need to attend to adult learners — frame the responses required. In the 25 years since “A Nation at Risk” was published, we have proceeded down a path that assumed the questions were well understood and the solutions on track. We have acted as though three different systems — preschool, K-12 and higher education — had so little in common with each other that they never needed to be considered together. And we have behaved as though the educational structures and behaviors that served the United States so faithfully and well in the second half of the 20th century would continue to fit our national purposes in the 21st.

They will not. As the rest of the world has arisen, new global competitors have emerged with a compulsion to excel. China is the most vivid example in American minds. This amazing country

<sup>38</sup> Julie Strawn, *Policies to Promote Adult Education and Postsecondary Alignment*. (Owensboro, KY: National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> E. Rice, “Innovative Employee Solutions 2006,” quoted in James T. Parker, *Workplace Education: Twenty State Perspectives* (Owensboro, KY: National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> “2005 Skills Gap Report — A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce” (Washington, DC: National Association of Manufacturers, undated). See also: Harry J. Holzer and Robert I. Lerman, *America’s Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Education and Training Requirements in the Next Decade and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Workforce Alliance, November 2007).

<sup>42</sup> National Commission on Community Colleges, *Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America’s Middle Class: An Action Agenda for Competitiveness Through Community Colleges* (New York: The College Board, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> For an excellent discussion of these issues, see Charlene Nunley, “Workforce Maryland: The Case for Strengthening Coordination of Adult Education and Workforce Preparation” (prepared for the Maryland State Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, December 2007).

has lifted millions out of poverty in a generation, raised cities the size of Manhattan out of fields, produced world-beating economic growth rates, installed one of the world's greatest hydroelectric complexes, laid a railroad across the Himalayas and begun to explore space while enlarging its role in the arts.

China is not alone. Canada and the Russian Federation display the same compulsion, as do Japan and Korea. Each of these nations has already met the 55 percent threshold for postsecondary attainment for young adults.<sup>44</sup> Great Britain is likely to join the club very soon; the British government has announced a goal of enrolling half of all young people in universities by 2010. Meanwhile, Norway, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Spain and France are already opening the door marked 40 percent.

Americans have always prided themselves on their capacity to excel, their commitment to be the best. It is time we drew on that capacity and reasserted that compulsion. The place to start is with education.

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<sup>44</sup> OECD, 2008.



## Recommendations: An Action Plan for American Schools, Colleges and Universities

The situation is serious: Too few low-income students have access to high-quality preschool programs ... planning for college begins too late ... large numbers of students do not know what they need to do to get themselves prepared for college work ... dropouts have become the “silent epidemic” in low-income communities, urban and rural ... many students have done little financial planning and are unaware of the aid available to them ... aid awards come too late to help with planning ... students struggle to succeed once enrolled in higher education ... many campuses have done little to monitor or evaluate their own institutional performance ... and adults seeking further education are left largely to fend for themselves.

To turn this situation around, this commission recommends a 10-part action agenda, described in shorthand below and developed throughout the rest of this chapter.

**To ensure that 55 percent of young American adults hold a community college degree or higher by 2025, this commission recommends that the American people, through their governments and education institutions, set out to:**

- I. **Provide a program of voluntary preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families** — so that all children at or below 200 percent of the official poverty line have a chance to enter school ready to learn.
- II. **Improve middle and high school college counseling** — by meeting professional staffing standards for counselors and involving colleges and universities in college planning.
- III. **Implement the best research-based dropout prevention programs** — to identify early those students at risk of dropping out and then provide them with a safety net.
- IV. **Align the K-12 education system with international standards and college admissions expectations** — so that all students are prepared for future opportunities in education, work and life.
- V. **Improve teacher quality and focus on recruitment and retention** — because an educational system can only be as good as its teachers.
- VI. **Clarify and simplify the admissions process** — to encourage more first-generation students to apply.
- VII. **Provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid processes more transparent** — to minimize student debt, and at least keep pace with inflation, make financial aid processes more transparent and predictable, and provide institutions with incentives to enroll and graduate more low-income and first-generation students.
- VIII. **Keep college affordable** — by controlling college costs, using available aid and resources wisely, and insisting that state governments meet their obligations for funding higher education.
- IX. **Dramatically increase college completion rates** — by reducing dropouts, easing transfer processes and using “data-based” approaches to improve completion rates at both two- and four-year institutions.
- X. **Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs** — by supplementing existing basic skills training with a new “honors GED” and through better coordination of existing adult education, veterans benefits, outreach programs and student aid.

These recommendations touch on the education pipeline from beginning to end — preschool through college. They represent a comprehensive and integrated response to the challenges outlined in Chapter 2. As developed below, they assign responsibility to schools, to institutions of higher

education and to government at all levels. The commission concludes this chapter with a pledge for regular follow-up on the recommendations and evaluation of how, and how well, they have been implemented.

## Recommendations

### I. Provide a Program of Voluntary Preschool Education Universally Available to Children From Low-Income Families

**WE RECOMMEND** that states provide a program of voluntary high-quality, preschool education, universally available to 3- and 4-year-old children from families at or below 200 percent of the poverty line.

Too many children from low-income families begin school at a disadvantage in areas of vocabulary building and reading readiness. Children of better-educated and more affluent parents are much more likely to enroll in preschool programs than children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The goal here is the development of state policy that aims to provide, on a voluntary basis, universal access to high-quality, half-day programs for 3-year-olds and half- and full-day programs for 4-year-olds for children from low-income families. Enactment of such programs will almost certainly produce children more ready for school and help children from low-income families secure the foundation that research shows to be important in later school success: the ability to read effectively and with adequate comprehension by grade 3.

- **States have the primary responsibility.** Governors and legislators, working with educators, community groups, and experts on Head Start and early childhood education should develop funding formulas to help communities establish and create effective preschool programs and standards for their operation.
- **Local school boards and districts can play a role.** There is every reason to expect that superintendents and local school boards will support initiatives of this type, conceivably by offering space for preschool programs and certainly by providing guidance on how best to align preschool curricular offerings with learning expectations in kindergarten.

- **Federal support has long been critical.** The federal government now spends more than \$6 billion annually on Head Start, a comprehensive program of health, social and educational services for low-income children. There is much to be learned from the success of Head Start.

- ✓ The commission believes federal support for innovation, standards, assessment, and research and development can do a great deal to advance the early learning agenda.
- ✓ The commission applauds President-elect Barack Obama for his campaign commitment to invest up to \$10 billion into preschool programs and trusts that he will do what he can to maintain this commitment, even in the face of what he described in November 2008 as the “greatest economic crisis of our times.”

### II. Improve Middle and High School College Counseling

**WE RECOMMEND** that states and localities move toward professional norms for staffing middle and high school counseling offices and that colleges and universities collaborate actively to provide college information and planning services to all students (with a special focus on low-income students).

All middle and high schools need a robust college counseling program to build students' college-going aspirations and help students and families understand the value of college; understand the importance of taking college-prep courses; navigate the college application, admissions and financial aid processes; and take full advantage of the financial aid available. The sooner this counseling starts, the better. Middle school is not too early; high school is often too late.

Professional norms for student-counselor ratios call for one counselor for every 250 students.<sup>45</sup> The national average at the high school level was actually very healthy in 2004-05, with 229 students per counselor, but fully 20 states exceed the recommended ratio, including two (Arizona and California) with more than 400 high school students per counselor, on average. The picture is much less promising at the middle school level. The

<sup>45</sup> See recommendations of the American School Counselor Association at [www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=460](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=460).

national average, across K-8 grades, is 882 students per counselor, with some jurisdictions reporting egregiously high per-student counselor workloads — California (1,832), Utah (2,673), Washington, D.C. (2,711), Minnesota (4,942) and Texas (7,882). Counselors simply cannot be expected to do a good job when they are expected to work with thousands of students.

- **State and local roles.** State and local education agencies have the lead roles here. They define acceptable practice and standards in middle school counseling. States should (1) adopt policies governing student-counselor ratios, and (2) set forth standards emphasizing college counseling in the middle school years. Local school boards need to provide the resources to make sure schools have enough counselors to take on these added responsibilities.
- **Higher education's role.** As noted in Chapter 2, a number of institutions of higher education (including the California State University system and Ohio State University) have actively stepped into middle school counseling, reaching out to schools, communities and faith-based organizations to make sure students and families from underrepresented communities are preparing for college as early as the middle school years. The commission supports such efforts and believes they should be expanded, state by state and community by community. In this regard, the commission notes that higher education statutes clearly permit such outreach; they should be modified to encourage (if not require) it.

It goes without saying that counselors should be professionally trained and certified and should benefit from opportunities for ongoing professional development. In addition, the commission believes that the counselors' professional role needs to be clarified and protected in the school setting. Too many schools are tempted to use counselors as jacks-of-all-trades. Counselors are trained and employed to counsel students about college and career possibilities and pathways; that is how they should be used.

- **Federal role.** The commission supports the Pathways to College Act, currently before Congress. The Act includes provisions for grants to school districts to improve the quality of college counseling for secondary school students, with a focus on programs that:

- ✓ support school counselors and other staff to ensure that an adviser is available to provide personalized postsecondary planning assistance to all students;
- ✓ ensure the availability of a school counselor to coordinate or provide personal postsecondary advising services for all students in the school setting; and
- ✓ ensure each student has at least one meeting with a counselor or other professional approved by the school no later than the first semester of high school to discuss postsecondary options, outline postsecondary goals and create a plan to achieve those goals.

- **Role of nonprofits.** Beyond institutional and governmental responsibilities, leading nonprofits can also play a huge role in improving middle and high school counseling. Local community-based organizations, including youth counseling organizations, area social services agencies and churches, are an important asset. Nonprofits at the national level are already involved in significant ways. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Young Scholars Program, for example, seeks high-achieving, low- to moderate-income seventh-grade students and cultivates their talents and abilities through high school by providing personalized advising and financial support to help secure challenging academic opportunities. The College Board has created CollegeEd<sup>®</sup>, a comprehensive classroom- and DVD-based college-counseling program that serves as a model for enhancing college counseling in middle school. CollegeEd includes lesson plans for use by counselors or teachers that can easily be integrated into existing classes or advisory periods, or it can stand on its own.

Schools can draw on considerable outside assistance in this critical work and should be encouraged to do so.

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### III. Implement the Best Research-Based Dropout Prevention Programs

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**WE RECOMMEND** that states and local educational agencies adopt targeted interventions (starting in elementary and middle schools) focused on early warning signs of students in danger of dropping out, so as to identify such students and put an educational safety net under them.

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Many educators and members of the general public view dropping out of school in two fairly conventional (and contradictory) ways. The first is that it is to be expected that certain demographic groups will leave school in disproportionate numbers. The second is that the reasons are mysterious and difficult to predict. Recent research reveals, however, that the decision is very predictable if educators pay attention to early warning signs. A number of studies over the years point to developments that should set off alarm bells, at home and at school.<sup>46</sup> High school dropouts can be predicted with 70 percent accuracy based on low reading scores in the third grade. What about further along the line? Sixth-graders at risk of dropping out once they get to high school include those who fail English or math, miss more than 20 percent of school or receive at least one “unsatisfactory” behavior mark in just one class.

Ninth-graders also send out crystal-clear signals. In Philadelphia, ninth-graders who pass only two subjects or miss 30 percent or more of school days stand a 75 percent chance of dropping out of school.<sup>47</sup>

Effective programs require attention to both data and students. These approaches, still in their early stages, are helping educators prevent students from falling through the cracks by focusing interventions and support on students who need them the most. Responding schools and districts find they need to intervene early (and that early intervention is often not expensive or time consuming), keep an eye on ninth-graders (with special attention to school climate, curriculum and credit accumulation), and re-engage out-of-school youth (including the development of alternative pathways and alternative schools).

- **State and local roles.** The lead responsibility lies with state and local educators. A number of promising dropout prevention programs have been developed in communities such as Philadelphia, which bring the latest thinking on early identification of potential dropouts and efforts targeted on students who display the most troubling early warning signs (see below). Every state should begin implementing such models.

### Targeted School Dropout Prevention Programs

Targeted and early warning systems that identify middle and high school students at risk of dropping out based on grades and attendance can do a lot to catch students before they fall. The broad dimensions of such programs are well described by Johns Hopkins University researchers in their discussion of dropout challenges in Philadelphia.<sup>48</sup> One aspect is designed to keep middle school students on track. Another focuses on at-risk ninth-grade students and assigns teams to work with those at greatest risk ([www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs)). A third, Project U-Turn, tries to bring back students who have already dropped out of school ([www.projectuturn.net](http://www.projectuturn.net)).

America’s Promise Alliance (led by former Secretary of State Colin Powell) is committed to a major program of dropout prevention as part of a significant effort over the next five years to improve the lives of 15 million children (<http://15in5.americaspromise.org/Pages/Strategy.aspx?id=416>).

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Ruth Curran Neild, et al., “An Early Warning System,” *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 2 (October 2007); Lyndsay Pinkus, “Using Early-Warning Data to Improve Graduation Rates: Closing Cracks in the Education System” (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, August 2008); and research downloaded from the National Children’s Reading Foundation at [www.readingfoundation.org/reading\\_research.jsp](http://www.readingfoundation.org/reading_research.jsp).

<sup>47</sup> Ruth Curran Neild, et al., “An Early Warning System,” *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 2 (October 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Curran Neild, et al., “An Early Warning System,” *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 2 (October 2007).

America's Promise Alliance believes the success of the nation's young people is grounded in experiencing key wraparound supports, the Five Promises (Caring Adults, Safe Places, A Healthy Start, An Effective Education and Opportunities to Help Others), in all aspects of their daily lives. To improve the lives of 15 million children in the next five years, the Alliance is committed to three National Action Strategies:

### All Kids Covered

Improving the health of children, a prerequisite for a successful school experience. The Alliance wants to make sure all children in the United States who are eligible for publicly funded health insurance programs are enrolled in those plans.

### Where the Kids Are

Investment in the daily lives of disadvantaged youth is the best way to produce the most dramatic results. By bringing partners together, the Alliance wants all Five Promises to be available through the places kids spend their time. The Alliance will work to create strong, integrated and coordinated local programs dedicated to helping young people succeed.

### Ready for the Real World

Children in middle school need more opportunities to connect what they learn in school to the possibilities open to them in the future. The Alliance aims to provide quality service learning and career exploration experiences to youth at a time when the choices they make can send them down the path to a productive and successful future.

- **The nonprofit role.** Nonprofit organizations, such as General Colin Powell's America's Promise Alliance, provide critical support in the area of dropout prevention.
- **Federal role.** Model demonstration programs of dropout prevention, which had been funded at close to \$5 million under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as recently as 2006, have been eliminated from presidential budget requests since 2007. Given the gravity of the dropout situation, particularly in large urban school systems, the commission considers this to be penny-wise and pound-foolish and strongly supports restoring and enhancing these funds and targeting them for implementation of the most time-tested, research-based programs in high-need communities.

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#### IV. Align the K-12 Education System with International Standards and College Admissions Expectations

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**WE RECOMMEND** *that governors, legislators and state education agencies work to provide a world-class education to every American student by aligning high school programs with international benchmarks tied to the demands of college, work and life.*

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As the analysis in Chapter 2 revealed, the academic intensity of the high school curriculum followed by students is the most important predictor of college success. Corporate leaders also agree that the standards required for success in the workplace increasingly parallel those required for college work. Unfortunately, too many students do not have access to a rigorous curriculum and graduate from high school unprepared to succeed in college or on the job.

A rigorous high school program is a beginning, but insufficient in itself. The high school curriculum needs to be aligned with the knowledge and skills

students need to master college-level work and succeed in the workplace. The time is long past for leaders in K-12 and higher education to come together to align these systems; if they are unable to do so, governors and legislators should force the issue.

Unfortunately, a number of analyses indicate that many state graduation standards are now the equivalent of what a tenth-grader needs to know and be able to do, requiring higher education institutions and businesses to spend an estimated \$17 billion on remediation.<sup>49</sup> By aligning curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional development to clear definitions of college and workforce readiness, schools can increase the likelihood that students will succeed on the job and in the college classroom after they receive their high school diplomas.

What is required is a great national conversation that helps states focus on benchmarking their K-12 education systems to those of top-performing nations. Such a conversation will acknowledge what we all know to be true: Core academic competencies exist that all students must master if they are to be prepared for the demands of the 21st century, whether they live in Boston, Birmingham or Beijing.

The conversation is already under way and must be accelerated. The commission is encouraged that the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers and Achieve have joined together to promote international benchmarks and provide a “road map” to help states benchmark their systems. Building on work such as Achieve’s American Diploma Project (a coalition of 33 states committed to aligned standards, assessments and graduation requirements), CCSSO’s advocacy of higher state expectations for rich content and skills aligned for success in the 21st century,<sup>50</sup> and the College Board’s Standards for College Success™, this new conversation can break new ground in the school reform agenda.

- **State role.** Governors and legislators should convene working panels of P-16 councils

(including leaders from preschool, K-12, higher education and business) to focus on:

- ✓ taking the “road map” provided by the emerging conversation and using it to accelerate the national movement to establish international standards defining knowledge and skills in areas such as reading, writing and mathematics;
  - ✓ developing strategies and timelines to govern standards development guiding teaching, learning and assessment in all schools; and
  - ✓ building a consensus on the knowledge and skills essential to the workplace and higher education readiness and success, so as to improve alignment between K-12 and the worlds of higher education and work.
- **Schools and colleges and universities.** School and institutional leaders should support professional development related to the effective use of standards as instructional tools for teachers, faculty and school leaders.
  - **Rigorous curriculum.** While these benchmarks are being developed, the commission believes a rigorous high school curriculum should include, at least:
    - ✓ four yearlong units of English and literature;
    - ✓ four units of college-preparatory mathematics;
    - ✓ three units of laboratory science;
    - ✓ two units of foreign language; and
    - ✓ three units of history and social science.

States should also explore the possibilities of going beyond the minima outlined above (and some states have already done so). Indiana’s Core 40 provides for a Core 40+ Academic Diploma, which requires an even more demanding curriculum. The New York State Regents diploma has long been a bellwether defining demanding secondary school preparation. The commission recognizes the benefits of a

<sup>49</sup> Jay P. Greene, *The Cost of Remedial Education* (Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> *Strategic Initiatives for the 21st Century and Beyond: Leading the Future of Education* (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, July 2008).

wide range of academic options available to students who want a more demanding high school academic experience. Many schools offer International Baccalaureate programs, and many also collaborate with local colleges to offer dual enrollment and other postsecondary enrollment option programs. The College Board's Advanced Placement Program® (AP®) can also be considered a model of great efficacy for raising overall student achievement, strengthening instructional capacity within schools and preparing students for success beyond high school.

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#### V. Improve Teacher Quality and Focus on Recruitment and Retention

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**WE RECOMMEND** that states, localities and the federal government step up to the crisis in teaching by providing market-competitive salaries, creating multiple pathways into teaching and fixing the math and science crisis.

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Teachers are the key to excellence in education. As noted earlier, an educational system can be no better than its teachers. Instead of continual churn and turnover, the United States needs to draw on the best and brightest to staff its schools and then create working conditions that keep teachers in their jobs. This will require investing in success today, instead of paying for failure later. In practical terms, improving teacher quality will require providing salaries for the real world, making teaching a preferred profession, creating multiple pathways into teaching and addressing the crisis in math and science teaching.

Although the K-12 and public sectors have not done everything they might to improve this situation, neither has higher education. Most campuses do not place much of a priority on teacher preparation; these programs are often at the back of the line when it comes to enhancement funds, scholarships and assistance with student recruiting — a very shortsighted approach given the foundation role K-12 teachers play in developing the human potential available to higher education. University leaders, in the form of presidents, chancellors, provosts and board members, need to focus on this situation and insist that it be turned around.

• **States and localities.** We recommend that the public sector:

- ✓ work to provide market-competitive salaries that relate teacher compensation to both qualifications and student and workforce needs;
- ✓ develop policies that provide incentives for teachers to teach in the most challenging school environments and to enter STEM fields; and
- ✓ establish professional working conditions for teachers by implementing career ladders, creating communities of learning within schools and districts, and establishing mentoring as a benchmark of best practice in hiring and professional development.

• **Teacher training institutions.** We recommend multiple pathways into the teaching profession.

- ✓ Both traditional and alternative routes should be encouraged.
- ✓ Teacher training institutions should develop alternative pathways to make midcareer entry into teaching more attractive by providing exposure to the major elements of pedagogy, classroom practice and classroom management.

• **Role of the federal government and states.**

Public leaders should establish incentive programs to increase the number of young people entering careers in mathematics, science and engineering (and into mathematics and science teaching) by 50 percent. The federal government should fully fund the STEM professional development provisions of the America COMPETES Act.

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#### VI. Clarify and Simplify the Admissions Process

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**WE RECOMMEND** that public and private institutions of higher education continue to uphold the highest professional standards in admissions and financial aid and collaborate to make the admissions process more transparent and less complex.

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The commission and the College Board's Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century believe that higher education needs to reduce the complexity of the admissions process and demystify it. For

all applicants, but particularly for first-generation applicants, there is a compelling need to make the task of applying to college less onerous and more transparent. Some aspects (e.g., federal student aid forms) are beyond strictly academic control, but higher education can do a great deal to simplify the transition. For example, colleges and universities that practice open admission or guaranteed admission for students meeting specific requirements should more clearly and widely communicate the criteria and the ease of admission to their institutions. And all colleges should extend their recruitment and outreach efforts to include urban and rural high schools that seldom host a college recruiter or admissions staff member.

Like the Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century, which issued “Preserving the Dream of America,” a valuable report to the community of admissions, financial aid and counseling professionals, the commission believes that the profession needs to be guided by its best values and that the college admissions process should be as inclusive as possible. It should be designed to include students, not lock them out. The commission endorses the task force’s statement of values as a guide to professional standards (see below).

## A Declaration of Values to Guide a Profession

### Preamble:

A new definition of academic excellence is needed in the United States. It should be more inclusive, more focused on student needs and more dedicated to “developing talent” instead of “selecting for talent” in the admissions process. To that end, we offer 10 principles to guide admissions, financial aid and school counseling professionals. We believe that:

- I. **Education is essential in this new century.** Unlike the 20th century, in this new world a college-educated citizenry is vital to the well-being of the United States. A college education (two- or four-year) should be within the reach of everyone. To meet this goal, educators need to improve both high school and college graduation rates and recognize that unequal educational opportunities for some students require extraordinary responses from us all.
- II. **Institutional diversity is one of our greatest assets.** The strength of American higher education lies in its diversity: All sectors of higher education have important roles to play in responding to the nation’s educational challenges. The diversity of our system and the many missions pursued by some 4,000 accredited, nonprofit, two- and four-year colleges and universities are essential to this diverse nation.
- III. **Education is a process, not a product.** The profession (made up of admissions and financial aid officers and school counselors) understands education to be a process, not a product, and students to be learners, not clients or customers. Competition and commercialism in our environment should not deter us from our educational goals and values.
- IV. **The school-to-college transition should be seen as a learning opportunity.** At its best, admission is about “fit” between student and institution. The profession encourages students and parents to see college admission as part of an educational learning process, one that encourages student exploration, autonomy, responsibility and maturity.
- V. **Student preparation must be improved.** We believe that schools, colleges and universities should collaborate to make a college-preparatory curriculum the “default” curriculum for every student, beginning in eighth grade, with planning starting in middle school. The content standards reflected in Achieve’s “American Diploma Project,” the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate



programs and the College Board Standards for College Success are all good places to start building rigorous curricula that prepare all students for college enrollment and success.

- VI. **School-university partnerships are essential and should be expanded and strengthened.** The profession encourages school-university partnerships to improve academic preparation, foster student aspiration and provide early awareness programs for all students — especially for first-generation college students and their families.
- VII. **Professional norms must govern student admission.** The profession insists that colleges and universities should commit to (1) providing concise information about their programs and requirements; (2) presenting themselves clearly, forthrightly and accurately; (3) selecting students using valid and equitable methods; and (4) using test results in accordance with professional norms and expectations.
- VIII. **Financial aid processes should be simplified and focused.** The profession believes that financial aid processes (at the institutional, state and federal levels) need to be simplified and made more coherent and predictable, with the goal of minimizing confusion on the part of students and families. The profession also believes that merit aid, particularly when financed publicly by regressive taxes or lotteries, has to clear a very high bar before it can justify itself as appropriate student aid.
- IX. **Access to success, not simply access, must be the goal.** As the College Board's CollegeKeys Compact emphasized, admission is a hollow promise without financial aid and sustainable academic support. The profession believes that all institutions and faculty must be dedicated to the success of students once they are admitted. The institutional aspiration should be that all students succeed in attaining the goals they set for themselves upon enrollment, e.g., a training certificate, successful transfer to a four-year institution, or an associate or bachelor's degree.
- X. **College rankings must be revisited.** The profession urges the College Board to convene a panel of experts (including educators, statisticians, sociologists and students of organizational behavior) to explore the validity, reliability and value of existing rankings and suggest, if necessary, new ways of providing better information to students and the general public. What the profession needs are accurate and educationally defensible assessments that focus on outcomes and help students and the public understand institutional value and functioning, without minimizing the importance of diversity or distorting institutional purposes.

The commission endorses the task force's fundamental belief that the community has a professional obligation to see to it that EVERY student in EVERY middle and secondary school in the United States has the best information about college admissions and financial aid. That is why, in Recommendation II, the commission insists that college and universities should become active participants in the middle and high school college counseling processes. The goal should be to demonstrate to ALL students that they can make the dream of a college education come true for themselves, even in communities and families where no one has ever attended college and sometimes few have completed high school.

- **The higher education community and its associations must do this work.** The commission endorses the task force's recommendation that the College Board help to develop training modules for admissions officers, financial aid officers and counselors. These modules should emphasize what admissions and financial aid and school counselors need to know and do: how to reach out to low-income and first-generation students; how to simplify the processes of admissions and student aid; how to communicate earlier and more effectively with counselors, students and parents; and how to accurately and reliably assess academic readiness for college. The modules contemplated include

topics such as advocacy, communications, complexity, changing demographics, educating institutional leaders, college prices and aid policy, professional standards, rankings and assessments, system alignment, and testing and its use and abuse.

Training opportunities and booklets, widely available to school counselors as well as admissions and financial aid officials, can go a long way toward improving and streamlining the complex processes of college admissions for all students.

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## **VII. Provide More Need-Based Grant Aid While Simplifying and Making Financial Aid Processes More Transparent**

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**WE RECOMMEND** *that federal and state officials encourage increased access by providing more need-based grant aid, making the process of applying for financial assistance more transparent and predictable, and finding ways to inform families, as early as the middle school years, of aid amounts likely to be available to individual students.*

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Need-based Pell Grants, the foundation of student aid programs, have not maintained their value over the years. According to the American Council on Education, in inflation-adjusted dollars, the maximum grant reached its highest value in 1975-76 and has not returned to that level since.<sup>51</sup> Today, the Pell Grant, which at its maximum covered 99 percent of the average costs of attendance at public two-year institutions, 77 percent at public four-year institutions and 36 percent at private colleges and universities, promises at best to cover 62 percent, 36 percent and 15 percent, respectively, of these costs. In fiscal 2006, more than 5.2 million students from families with median incomes below \$20,000 annually received Pell Grants, with the maximum award set at \$4,310. Recent Congressional action has made some inroads toward closing the gap between Pell Grants and college costs, but more needs to be done.

Meanwhile, there are problems with the balance of grant-based aid and loans. While in 1976, the two major federal grant programs (Pell

Grant and the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants) accounted for 43 percent of all student aid under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, today the Pell/FSEOG share amounts to just 16 percent of all Title IV funding.

The crisis in the Pell program has accelerated as the nation's financial crisis has deepened. The hollowing out of the middle class in recent years has created a dramatic increase in the number of eligible students. In October 2008, the number of Pell-eligible students seeking financial aid was 1.3 million higher than the number anticipated, a situation suggesting that the Pell Grant program would be required to reduce aid awards for millions of students or receive an immediate \$6 billion increase in funding.

Although state support for public higher education and for state-funded student aid is essential, state legislators are sometimes tempted to use higher education as a "piggy bank," in the words of one report from state legislators; that is to say, as a source of discretionary funding for other state priorities (on the assumption that cutbacks in state support can be made up by increases in student tuition). This approach threatens to undermine the educational underpinnings of state economies. State policymakers need to understand that even a 1 percent decrease in state appropriations for higher education can easily translate into a 5 percent hike in tuition rates. Meanwhile, states have frequently oriented several of their grant programs around academic merit instead of need, further eroding the availability of aid for low-income students.

Clarity, predictability and greater simplicity in processes are other features badly needed in the student aid discussion. With the reauthorization of federal student aid programs completed, now is the time to ask how these programs work and who benefits from them. The commission calls for a clear and careful reassessment of federal student aid. Some plans for broad-based reform have already been put forward, for example, from the U.S. Department of Education and from the College Board's study group, *Rethinking Student Aid*.<sup>52</sup> The commission applauds these efforts and

<sup>51</sup> Bryan J. Cook and Jacqueline E. King, "2007 Status Report on the Pell Grant Program" (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, June 2007).

<sup>52</sup> See *Fulfilling the Commitment: Recommendations for Reforming Federal Student Aid* (New York: The College Board, September 2008).

hopes that more will be forthcoming to promote a rich and broad discussion. The commission is especially impressed with the principles undergirding the Rethinking Student Aid study group, and believes they deserve restatement. Student aid should:

1. Have as its main purpose helping those who are unlikely to meet their educational goals without financial help.
2. Provide federal grant aid that, in combination with a reasonable amount of work and loans, is adequate to make completion of a four-year degree financially possible for all qualified students.
3. Be provided as clearly, as transparently and as simply as possible; communication with families and students about college opportunity should be early, proactive, encouraging, sustained and accurate.
4. Be predictable so that individuals and families in given economic circumstances can anticipate confidently the resources that will be available to meet their needs.
5. Be oriented first and foremost to helping students, with concerns about the impact of policy changes on particular institutions such as colleges, banks or government agencies relegated to secondary interest.
6. Help students not only to begin postsecondary education but also to succeed after they arrive.
7. Use taxpayer funds as efficiently as possible in advancing the principles set out above.

• **State role.** States have a responsibility to maintain support for higher education and to ensure that student access is maintained even in the face of state fiscal challenges. The commission considers it essential that states:

- ✓ try to maintain higher education funding levels, even amidst constrained state budgets.
- ✓ maintain a commitment to access by providing additional state support for need-based

grant aid to compensate for appropriations reductions that cannot be avoided.

- ✓ make sure that state grants generally follow need-based approaches. The commission understands the appeal of merit-based state awards, but believes the lion's share of state grants should be awarded on the basis of need.
- **Federal role.** Since enactment of the Higher Education Act in 1965, the federal government has taken the lead in shaping and financing student aid. The commission believes the federal government should:
  - ✓ immediately increase the maximum Pell grant to \$5,100 and fund the program at levels sufficient to meet the needs of all eligible students;
  - ✓ appropriate \$1 billion annually for the FSEOG program, to provide up to \$4,000 additionally for extremely needy students (colleges and universities match these funds on a one-to-three basis);
  - ✓ launch a multiyear conversation with the admissions, financial aid and school counseling communities about how to reshape federal student aid;
  - ✓ enact a federal "Title I-like" program that would provide institutions with resources to help low-income and first-generation students with the counseling, guidance and supplementary services they require; and<sup>53</sup>
  - ✓ develop a "Title I-like" program, which would consist of a formula-grant providing a specified amount for each Pell Grant student enrolled on campus, require that these funds be used to supplement and not supplant existing academic advisement and student services funding on campus, and be employed to provide academic advisement, student support and enrichment activities, based on academic need, for all Pell Grant recipients.

The proposal to provide supplementary funds for counseling and advisement actually

<sup>53</sup> "Title I" refers to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (now known as No Child Left Behind), which provides elementary and secondary schools with supplementary funds to improve the education of disadvantaged children.

restores one of the original intents of the Pell Grant program (known as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant when enacted in 1972). The original legislation provided for complementary institutional allocations, known as “cost of education allowances,” that would accompany grant recipients to the college or university of their choice. These cost of education allowances were never funded. It is the commission’s belief that this new “Title I-like” program should provide a grant of perhaps \$500 annually for each Pell recipient who enrolls at an eligible public or private, nonprofit, two- or four-year college or university, along with \$2,500 for each Pell recipient who graduates.

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## VIII. Keep College Affordable

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**WE RECOMMEND** *that academic leaders work to control tuition increases and that state officials maintain state support.*

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College affordability has become a high priority among state and federal policymakers, and is a major concern of parents, students and institutional leaders. We understand and sympathize with the concern. Everyone in higher education understands that “sticker shock” is a real phenomenon, even though the published price does not always match the cost to the recipient.

A dual responsibility exists to maintain college affordability. The commission urges institutional vigilance with regard to costs, particularly as the nation pursues the ambitious goal of having 55 percent of all young adults completing a community college degree or higher within a generation. Colleges and universities should be held accountable for finding lower-cost means of delivering high-quality education. At the same time, states should be expected to meet their obligations and pay their fair share of the cost of education. If state officials truly believe that an educated citizenry is critical to the future of states and the nation, they need to make the investments required to secure that future.

- **Higher education can shoulder a part of the burden.** The commission believes that the nation’s colleges and universities should:

- ✓ strengthen institutional cost control efforts and increase institutional productivity, conceivably through institutional efficiency reviews to

identify effective cost-saving possibilities relevant to institutional mission and quality.

- ✓ use consortia arrangements for the purchase of certain services to benefit from economies of scale that result from joint purchases of insurance, energy, equipment and the like.
  - ✓ employ promising new strategies involving the effective use of information technology to improve student learning, monitor progress and reduce instructional costs.
  - ✓ make greater use of distance learning. Many institutions are exploring the use of Web-based instruction both as a way to extend their reach to more students and to reduce costs. Several models are emerging for efficient, cost-effective and sustainable delivery of online courses. These models should be explored for implementation and expansion.
- **States have a large responsibility, too.** The historic relationship of a shared partnership between the state and the student is eroding, with students and their families paying an increasing share of their educational costs. The traditional partnership needs to be revisited and shored up. High-quality, affordable higher education requires that states meet their responsibility and pay their “fair share” of the cost of education. In addition to the suggestions for states included in Recommendation VII, the commission believes that the nation’s governors and legislators should:
    - ✓ pull together statewide task forces to re-examine college financing and the appropriate share of operating and capital costs to be borne by students, local taxing agencies and the states; and
    - ✓ convene similar high-level working groups of legislators, agency officials and university leaders to establish appropriate goals for the net cost of a public institution for students from low-income families to ensure that cost is not a barrier to college access and degree completion.

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## IX. Dramatically Increase College Completion Rates

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**WE RECOMMEND** that institutions of higher education set out to dramatically increase college completion rates by improving retention, easing transfer among institutions, and implementing data-based strategies to identify retention and dropout challenges.

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Colleges and universities have an obligation to improve student retention, minimize dropouts and raise degree completion rates. What is needed is the development of a culture on campus that includes the expectation that every admitted student will, in fact, graduate, and a determination to understand what is going on when students do not.

There are several issues here: While successful colleges pay attention to data around graduation and student progress, too many have little capacity to monitor their performance. Unlike universities elsewhere in the world that collaborate around lifelong learning, credit exchange and qualifications frameworks, many college and universities in the United States make the awarding of transfer credit a laborious, often unpredictable, process. Finally, while the most generous estimates of successful transfer from two- to four-year institutions cite 50 percent transfer rates, most estimates are at the 25 percent level.

• **Only the higher education community can address these issues.** The commission believes that the nation's colleges and universities should:

- ✓ implement data-based strategies, such as the seven-point dropout prevention plan outlined in Chapter 2, that focus on student retention, monitor year-to-year change, examine blockages in the pipeline (particularly in foundation courses), study the impact of different interventions on student success, break down the numbers among different student populations and continually explore how to improve institutional performance (see p. 34).

- ✓ focus relentlessly on the educational needs and challenges of those students most likely to run the risk of dropping out — low-income, minority or first-generation students. Even after secondary school programs are improved and greater alignment is achieved between K-12 and higher education institutions, it would be foolish to believe that these students, once on campus, will not continue to need additional academic support and advisement.
- ✓ convene a national, ongoing forum to explore and make recommendations about how to facilitate ease of movement among institutions (and transfer of credit) while maintaining institutional autonomy and program integrity. The commission does not believe that European “qualifications frameworks” can be imposed on the unique system of American higher education, but it is apparent that European institutions have started to respond to growing social mobility in 21st-century advanced economies in ways that American institutions have not.
- ✓ develop programs of study at community colleges that enable students to transfer with junior standing to four-year institutions. States should also explore the possibilities of adapting “competency-based” transfer programs between two- and four-year institutions.

## Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream, a program funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education and others, is one example of an initiative that puts the seven-point dropout prevention program into action.

The program involves more than 80 institutions (predominantly community colleges) in 15 states that are using an evidence-based approach to improving student retention, progression and degree achievement, with particular attention to low-income students and students of color.

These colleges use research and data to drive intervention strategies aimed at closing performance gaps among students. Early outcomes are identifying some promising practices that can be adopted and adapted by colleges across the nation to reduce college dropout rates.

See Achieving the Dream at <http://www.achievingthedream.org>.

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### X. Provide Postsecondary Opportunities as an Essential Element of Adult Education Programs

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**WE RECOMMEND** *a renewed commitment to adult education opportunities, one that supplements existing basic skills training and General Educational Development opportunities with a new “honors GED,” and better coordination of federal and state efforts to provide adult education, veterans benefits, outreach programs and student aid.*

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Most of the nation’s 2020 workforce is already out of school. It will take the next 17 years of high school graduates to equal the pool of employees already in the workforce. The nation cannot achieve its goals of economic growth and development while ignoring Americans already on the job (or looking for work). Older workers, displaced workers, and the underemployed and unemployed require serious policy attention.

A hodgepodge of existing programs in adult literacy and adult basic education already exist. Most are underfunded; too many of them operate in isolation from each other and from K-12 and, apart from community colleges, the higher education community. In the commission’s view, these programs need better support and coordination, and they need to be supplemented with a new emphasis on postsecondary opportunities for adults who dropped out of high school or graduated but chose not to pursue a tertiary degree.

- **State role.** States have the major responsibility for providing K-12 education. Through their adult education efforts, they should renew their commitment to adult literacy and adult basic education programs. They should also work to provide school dropouts (and recent immigrants) with the dignity of a high school credential by encouraging completion of GED programs.
- **Private sector role.** The GED was developed following World War II to provide veterans with the equivalent of a high school diploma. It is still highly useful as the first rung on the educational ladder for dropouts and recent immigrants. Recent research suggests that although GED holders fare better in the job market than school dropouts, they do not advance as far or as fast as regular diploma holders and experience greater difficulty in higher education. The commission understands that some consideration is being given to developing an “honors GED” by the American Council on Education (which developed and administers the program). The honors GED would be more oriented around confirming the GED as a more appropriate credential for college admission. The commission applauds the concept.
- **Federal role.** Given the need (and the acknowledged federal leadership role in adult education over the years), the federal government provides surprisingly little support for adult education, a total of about \$580 million annually.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, other programs (including

<sup>54</sup> Appendix to the Federal Budget (2008): 325.

student aid, GI Bill benefits, and the vocational and technical offerings of community colleges) provide additional resources for adult learning, but this area seems to the commission to be one in which doubling the federal investment could produce enormous benefits in educational outcomes and improved productivity, at a relatively modest cost. The commission recommends that the federal government:

- ✓ provide \$1 billion annually for adult education programs at the federal level;

- ✓ encourage outreach activities to job-training and adult education activities by two- and four-year institutions; and

- ✓ help states establish statewide coordinating bodies to integrate existing federal and state workforce training programs, adult education opportunities, the Webb GI Bill, student aid, and activities such as TRIO to reach out to older, displaced, unemployed and immigrant employees.

### Annual Progress Report

Measures of annual progress toward the commission’s goal of increasing college access, admission and success based on a set of core indicators.

Recommendation	Indicator
Increase the number of adults who earn a college degree or postsecondary education credential to 55 percent by 2025	Percent of adults 25 to 34 years of age with a two- or four-year college degree or credential
Provide voluntary access to preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families	National — Percent of children ages 3 to 4 from low-income families enrolled in preschool in given year State — Number of states that have legislated (and funded) preschool programs for children from low-income families
Implement proven dropout prevention programs	Decrease in dropout rates, as defined by U.S. DOE Increase in the percent of students who graduate from high school
Establish college-preparatory curriculum aligned to world-class standards	Number of states that require a college-prep curriculum for all students in order to graduate from high school Percent of annual increase in AP participation and success
Clarify financial aid processes; increase grant aid in step with inflation; minimize student debt; make aid more predictable; provide incentives to institutions to enroll and graduate low-income and first-generation students	Summary of changes made to federal student aid that affect simplicity and predictability Total grant aid per student New policies that provide incentives to institutions to enroll and graduate low-income and first-generation students
Keep college affordable	College costs rise at a rate that is equal to or below the rate of inflation
Improve college retention	Increase in the percentage of students enrolled in college who graduate in six years

## **Evaluation, Accountability and Follow-up**

Since “A Nation at Risk” was published in 1983, many reports from blue-ribbon commissions critical of K-12 education and higher education have appeared. Some have been well informed; some have not. Many of the reports have been valuable; others have gathered dust on library shelves. The most effective reports have been those that were accompanied by well thought-out plans for follow-up action.

The College Board will disseminate this report widely, hold conversations with leaders who would have responsibility for implementing the report’s recommendations, and publish an annual review (on a state-by-state basis, where possible) of national progress toward the goals and objectives set forth here. The table on page 35 provides a preliminary outline of the sort of evaluation and accountability assessments that will be included in these annual reports.

## **Final Thoughts**

Throughout this document, we have pointed to powerful and sobering trends, which, if not reversed, threaten our nation’s economic and national security. International comparisons indicate that the typical performance of American students at the end of secondary school lags far behind that of students in many European and Asian countries. We no longer lead the world in the proportion of young adults with a college degree, as we did a few decades ago. The growing diversity of the student population in American schools promises to make white Americans a minority at some point in the middle of this century. What is welcome about this latter development is that it affirms America’s unique sense of itself as a “melting pot” and land of opportunity; what is cause for concern, however, is that K-12 achievement and graduation levels for large numbers and proportions of financially disadvantaged minority populations lags well behind those of white Americans. As the nation faces this reality, we must do so in the knowledge that it will require enormously more effort and resources simply to maintain the educational status quo.

As this report goes to press, our country is facing an economic crisis of a magnitude not seen since the 1930s. Quite literally overnight, our nation’s political leaders determined that it was necessary to appropriate nearly \$1 trillion to avoid the collapse of major financial institutions, which would lead to unthinkable outcomes for society. The growing education deficit described in this report is no less a threat to our nation’s long-term well-being than the current fiscal crisis. It requires the same kind of attention and action at the highest levels of our national and state governments. Indeed, the economic bailout of our financial institutions will fail if it is little more than an effort to patch up what went wrong so that the system that just collapsed can stumble along as it did before. It is an illusion to believe that if a society is making money, it is creating wealth. Real wealth is created when societies invest in the future, including investing in the human capital of a productive people.

As columnist Thomas Friedman recently pointed out, what we need is not just a bailout, but also a buildup. For the reality is that the future of the United States and the health of its economy depend largely on the productivity of its people. Economists have demonstrated over and over again that expenditures on education are not *costs*, but *investments* in a better tomorrow. They are repaid, many times over, in higher incomes, increased productivity and lower expenditures on public assistance, public housing and the criminal justice system. In the past, many of America’s leaders have understood this fact. Even when the United States was indebted, broken and practically on its knees, these leaders had the courage to look to the future, confident that its people, properly educated, would preserve the dream that is America for the rest of the world.

So, even before the United States became a Republic, Congressional leaders of the Confederation, presiding over a debt-ridden new entity, enacted the Northwest Ordinance of 1785, setting aside public lands for schools. Leading a nation that was shattered physically, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act in 1862, creating a burst of American energy with public land-grant colleges and universities. President Roosevelt helped launch the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s with the 1944 G.I. Bill, a triumph built upon by President Eisenhower in 1958 with the National



Defense Education Act, and President Nixon in 1972, who signed into law the most significant federal student aid provisions since the G.I. Bill.

This is not a partisan matter. Even in the most demanding and trying and dangerous times, presidents from both political parties have understood that the federal budget is an amazingly flexible instrument of public policy and that the education of the next generation was one of government's preeminent obligations. In the right hands, the public treasury is a great resource capable of being applied to magnificent public purposes. If our nation's and our states' leaders act wisely in the coming months and years, we will find that to be no less true today than it was in previous eras.

The time for what President Kennedy once termed "comfortable inaction" has come and gone. What has arrived is the time for the kind of bold new investments and courageous innovative actions called for in this report. The commission members are of the firm belief that should this occur, should its recommendations be widely adopted and embraced, we can reverse the troubling trends of the past several decades and place the United States on a different trajectory, one that leads the United States and its people into a bright future where we once again set the standard for the world in the education, productivity and prosperity of our citizenry.

# Appendix A

## **Acknowledgments**

The members of the Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education want to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of several people who were critical to the successful completion of this work.

Our first acknowledgment goes to the experts who shared their knowledge and experience with us at nearly half a dozen meetings over 18 months. We could not have organized our work without the benefit of their insights and wisdom. All of them are listed in Appendix C.

We thank the College Board for its generous support of the commission. College Board President Gaston Caperton understood this effort to be the capstone of a number of blue-ribbon task forces and study groups organized by the College Board and provided us with enthusiastic support.

The chairman wants particularly to acknowledge the commitment of the commission members to this undertaking. All of them are busy people with a lot of demands on their time; they were unstinting in their dedication to our work.

We appreciate the leadership of Fred Dietrich, senior adviser to the president of the College Board, and Bradley J. Quin, executive director of higher education advocacy and special initiatives of the College Board, who staffed our work. We are deeply in their debt and want to acknowledge also the assistance of David Kellner, events coordinator, who tirelessly made sure our meetings were well organized.

We benefitted greatly from thoughtful readings of this report in draft form by several people. We want, in particular, to thank Tom Rudin, senior vice president of advocacy, government relations and development, and Christen Pollock, director of advocacy, and government relations, for their comments and suggestions. Tom, Christen and Janice Doyle, chief of staff to the chancellor, University System of Maryland, provided invaluable assistance in outlining the basic line of thinking in the report, and we appreciate the support of James Harvey of Seattle for his help in getting these ideas down on paper.

## Appendix B

### **Commission Charge**

Access and success in higher education have become the keys to personal and collective achievement for our nation's young people and for the development of a vibrant and globally competitive democratic society. In recent years, concern has grown that access to a postsecondary educational opportunity has become more elusive for a growing number of students and, to an even greater degree, for those historically underrepresented in our nation's collegiate population.

The reasons for this growing gap in access are many and involve a complex set of interactions. At the core of this issue has been an intense discussion — among educators, students, families, the press, policymakers and business owners — about the actual transition process from high school to college. Once thought to be orderly and relatively accessible to most seeking higher education, the process is now viewed to be less transparent and unpredictable and, as a result, has itself become a potential barrier to access to postsecondary education, especially for underrepresented populations.

Whatever the causes, the effect of diminished access has a devastating impact on the lives of individuals seeking advancement through education and on our collective hopes for advancing our society's interests and welfare. For the individual, having access to and successfully graduating from an institution of higher education has proved to be the path to a better job, to better health and to a better life. The benefits of an educated citizenry in a global economy are critical to the nation as a whole.

Finding ways to address and positively impact the reasons for reduced access, including the problems in the admissions process that impact access, is critical to our national welfare.

The charge to the commission is to create a national conversation on the antecedents and root causes of diminished access to, and graduation from, higher education in society today. The commission will explore the demographic, political, socioeconomic, public policy and educational trends that impact access, admission and retention in higher education. At the core of the examination will be how to achieve both higher participation and graduation rates among all the nation's college aspirants. The conversation will weave together the societal issues of access with the issues of admission, financial aid and retention practices and examine their interdependencies.

The commission will seek advice and counsel from national experts. It will report on its deliberations and make recommendations to decision makers — in school systems, on campuses and in the public policy arena — for actions that address the issues. It will develop plans to help facilitate the speedy adoption of its recommendations in order to achieve the goal of increasing access to higher education in American society as rapidly as possible.

## Appendix C

### **Presentations to the Commission**

The following is a list of presentations by subject matter experts made to the full commission at one of its five working meetings.

“Access and Success in Higher Education: A Look at the Numbers,” Kati Haycock, president, The Education Trust, May 2007

“American Diploma Project: State Policies That Promote Readiness for All Students,” Matthew Gandall, executive vice president, Achieve Inc., November 2007

“The College Board’s Low-Income Task Force: Research Plan and Goals,” Youlonda Copeland-Morgan, vice provost for enrollment, Syracuse University; and Steve Brooks, executive director, North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, co-chairs, May 2007

“The College Board Standards for College Success: Supporting a Pathway to College Readiness and Success,” Natasha Vasavada, senior director, College Board Standards, The College Board, March 2008

“Counseling to Success: Challenges in the Profession,” Phyllis Hart, senior consultant, National School Advocacy Project, The College Board, March 2008

“Education at a Glance, 2007,” Andreas Schleicher, head, Indicators and Analysis Division, Directorate for Education, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, March 2008

“Fulfilling the Commitment: Recommendations for Reforming Federal Student Aid,” Sandy Baum, professor of economics, Skidmore College, senior policy analyst, The College Board; and Michael McPherson, president, The Spencer Foundation, June 2008

“How the World’s Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top,” Sir Michael Barber, expert principal, McKinsey & Company, November 2007

“Motivating the Middle School Student: Support and Preparation for the Next Steps,” Gene Bottoms, senior vice president, Southern Regional Education Board, November 2007

“Preliminary Report from the Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century,” Jerry Lucido, vice provost for enrollment policy and management, University of Southern California, chairman of the Task Force and vice chairman of the commission, June 2008

“Preserving the Dream: An Open Letter to the Professionals in Admissions, Financial Aid and Counseling,” Jerry Lucido, vice provost for enrollment policy and management, University of Southern California, chairman of the Task Force and vice chairman of the commission, October 2008

“Retention and Challenges to Completion: What the Research Says,” Don Hossler, professor of education leadership and policy studies, Indiana University School of Education, March 2008

“Re-Thinking Student Aid,” Sandy Baum, professor of economics, Skidmore College, senior policy analyst, The College Board, May 2007

“Successful Retention Activities,” Kati Haycock, president, The Education Trust, June 2008

“The Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century: Goals and Objectives,” Jerry Lucido, vice provost for enrollment policy and management, University of Southern California, chairman of the Task Force and vice chairman of the commission, May 2007

“Task Force on College Access for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds,” Youlonda Copeland-Morgan, vice provost for enrollment, Syracuse University, co-chair, Low-Income Task Force, November 2007

“Teacher Preparation: Report From the Front Lines,” Sharon Robinson, president and CEO, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, November 2007

“Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America’s Middle Class: An Action Agenda for Community Colleges,” Ron Williams, vice president, Community College Initiatives, The College Board, March 2008

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