



## **Alliance of Public College and University Associations**

### **A Commitment to Completion**

*To bolster educational attainment efforts and strengthen educational pathways for students, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) pledge to work collectively as associations to support and accelerate the college completion efforts of our member colleges and universities.*

#### **Impetus for Action**

Business, philanthropic, and government leaders recognize higher education as an essential leverage point in improving the lives and future prospects of all Americans. The global economy has shifted the balance toward valuing innovation, creativity, and highly skilled workers, and the United States cannot afford to continue to slip in educational access and attainment when compared to other nations. Political leaders in Congress and across both parties support increasing college attainment to make the United States the first in the world in terms of the educational level of the adult population. The Obama Administration, higher education organizations, and foundations have all set target goals for a greater proportion of Americans to earn high-quality college degrees and credentials and bring the United States back on educational par with other nations.

Higher education brings public value to all. Society as a whole gains from having an educated populace: industry can thrive where there are capable and versatile workers; citizens have better health outcomes and lower healthcare burdens; and there is a social cost decline with better civic awareness and responsibility and decreased rates of crime. Higher education strengthens the fabric of society and ensures greater economic security for America and the next generation of citizens.

Educational attainment is valuable for the individual as well as society. Studies repeatedly show the lifetime earnings of college graduates are vastly greater than for those who hold only a high school diploma. The personal rewards they reap over a lifetime make higher education one of the best investments a person can make. While rates of employment for virtually all were lowered by the 2008 recession, the disparity in average incomes between college and high school graduates actually increased. Better educated people have greater flexibility to adapt the needs and opportunities of a changing world.

## **Commitment to Collaborate Across Associations and Sectors**

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) pledge to work together to facilitate and accelerate efforts to reach these important national educational attainment goals. Collectively, AACC, AASCU and APLU can better assist their member institutions in tackling obstacles that impede students from earning a degree or certificate in a timely and cost-efficient manner.

AASCU, APLU and AACC have a history of collaboration on initiatives such as the Student Achievement Measure, the Post-Collegiate Outcomes framework, and other public education advocacy efforts. This new commitment reinforces the existing partnerships and provides opportunities for the three associations to work more closely together on critical issues related to educational attainment, particularly for low-income, minority, and adult students. Areas of intended collaboration include:

- Creating seamless transitions for students across sectors and institutions through strategies such as proactive, enhanced advising; improved transfer of credits, including more robust articulation agreements; and innovative enrollment and student financial aid policies that support successful transfer and subsequent degree attainment as well as facilitate reverse transfer when appropriate.
- Improved access and opportunity by building clear educational and career pathways through better alignment among K-12, community colleges, and universities – especially in the STEM fields and in other areas of local/national need. Enhanced engagement with K-12 education will be necessary.
- More accurate and comprehensive outcomes measures of student progress and success for external accountability and institutional improvement. The work will include whenever possible common public policy positions designed to buttress ongoing voluntary efforts.

This collective commitment by the three associations will more effectively position public colleges and universities to build networks, share ideas, evaluate promising practices, and, most importantly, institute reforms within each of these important areas. (See addendum for a list of planned activities)

## **Ongoing Commitments by Public Universities and Community Colleges**

Members of APLU, AACC, and AASCU are taking actions to dramatically increase the proportion of individuals with high-quality degrees and certificates to reach our nation's educational attainment goals. As nearly three-quarters of U.S. postsecondary students are enrolled in public institutions, public colleges and universities are critical to increasing college completion.

Within the four-year public university sector, members of AASCU and APLU affirmed their commitment to accessible, affordable, and quality public higher education for all students as part of [Project Degree Completion](#). Together the associations and nearly 500 institutions have committed to doing their part in reaching the goal of 60 percent of the working age population having a degree or certificate by 2025.

Specifically, they have committed to raising as a group the number of high-quality baccalaureate degrees by 3.8 million between 2011 and 2025. Achieving these numbers include supporting a greater number of low-income and minority students who complete a bachelor's degree.

In addition the universities as a group have committed to the following:

- To ensure educational quality is enhanced, not compromised, in the effort to increase degree attainment.
- To uphold the principles of student access, success, and diversity in this pursuit.
- To reduce the average time to degree for students.
- To constrain per-student educational expenditures while pursuing enhanced quality.
- To make a concerted effort to reach out to former students who have attended these institutions but who have not earned a baccalaureate degree from any institution.
- To work closely with P-12 systems and community colleges, especially in the STEM fields and other areas of critical need.
- To support economic growth in our regions, states, and country including research and innovation, commercialization of technologies, and economic development. For many institutions, this will include increasing graduates in areas of critical need including STEM fields.

For the community college sector, the AACC's [Reclaiming the American Dream, Community Colleges and the Nation's Future](#) pledges that community colleges together will produce 50 percent more students with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020. In addition, AACC offers implementation strategies and resources through its [21<sup>st</sup> Century Center](#) to support its member colleges in reaching the target goal. Strategies include but are not limited to the following:

- Publicly commit to explicit goals for college completion.
- Create coherent, structured pathways to completion and ensure students enter a pathway soon after beginning college.
- Expand prior-learning assessment to award appropriate college credit for pertinent learning acquired in other contexts such as military service.
- Develop completion strategies on both ends of the college experience, including improving student outcomes in high-risk entry-level classes, and helping students with 30 credit hours or more to take the final steps to completion.
- Seek to establish guarantees for seamless transfer of designated courses, certificates, and degrees from community college to universities.
- Implement automatic graduation and reverse transfer programs to ensure that students who transfer before completing a community college degree can apply credit later earned at other community colleges and baccalaureate institutions to complete and be awarded a credential.

## Need for Renewed Commitment by Federal, State, and Local Partners

Dramatically increasing degree completion requires concerted action on the part of public colleges and universities as well as perseverance by students. Reaching degree attainment targets is also predicated on a strong, renewed cooperation among the states, local districts, and the federal government, and there is significant work to be done. The partnerships among institutions, states, local districts, and the federal government that have given students the opportunity to attend college must be revived and incentivized, with each partnership fulfilling its responsibilities.

In particular, the lack of explicit linkages between federal aid programs and state funding in current public policy masks the fact that the primary cause of rising public tuition levels is cost-shifting, from the states to students. A partnership among the federal government and states that creates a true policy alignment between federal programs and state funding practices is needed to reverse the cost shifting of public college net costs from students and families and to achieve the college completion goal. The federal government must maintain its commitment to student financial aid; support for research and innovation; and encouragement of states to continue their support for public colleges and universities.

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*As the voice of the nation's community colleges, the **American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)** delivers educational and economic opportunity for 13 million diverse students in search of the American Dream. Uniquely dedicated to access and success for all students, AACC's nearly 1,200 member colleges provide an on-ramp to degree attainment, skilled careers and family-supporting wages. Located in Washington, D.C., AACC advocates for these not-for-profit, public-serving institutions to ensure they have the resources and support they need to deliver on the mission of increasing economic mobility for all.*

*The **American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)** is a Washington, D.C.-based higher education association of more than 400 public colleges, universities, and systems whose members share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to underserved student populations, and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and cultural development.*

*The **Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)** is a research, policy, and advocacy organization representing 239 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations. Founded in 1887, APLU is North America's oldest higher education association with member institutions in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, four U.S. territories, Canada, and Mexico. Annually, member campuses enroll 4.8 million undergraduates and 1.3 million graduate students, award 1.2 million degrees, employ 1.4 million faculty and staff, and conduct \$41.4 billion in university-based research.*

# ADDENDUM

## **Alliance of Public College and University Associations Detailed Commitment of Activities to Increase Educational Attainment**

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) agree to work closely together to expand access, increase retention, and expand the number of high quality degrees and certificates, particularly but not exclusively for low-income, minority, and adult students. The associations and their members are deeply committed to achieving the big national goal of ensuring a majority of working age Americans hold a postsecondary degree or certificate.

The associations have made specific measureable commitments to achieve the big attainment goal. The associations and their member institutions understand they play a critical role in providing the education and skills for a competitive workforce and an engaged society, and plan to do their part in achieving the country's ambitious educational attainment goals. The member institutions include over 1,700 public colleges and universities and enroll 13.5 million students - two-thirds of the nation's students. This new partnership is a pledge to work closely together to increase the success of these students.

Associations have the power of convening individuals and organizations to drive important issues. AACC, AASCU, APLU can bring together the right partners to listen, learn, and act. AACC, AASCU, and APLU have the ability to support their member institutions in the quest to discover, understand and drive innovative programs and to accelerate the implementation of such programs across more institutions.

Areas of commitment and associated activities include areas outlined below. Some of the activities are already underway, some are planned, and others will be developed and implemented all with input from member institutions.

**Commitment 1:** Work toward seamless transitions for students across sectors and institutions including improved transfer of credit, clear articulation agreements, and supportive enrollment and financial aid policies. An emphasis will be place on providing access to effective advising, counseling, and mentoring for low income students.

- In late January 2015, AACC with the support of APLU and AASCU will bring together community college and university leaders to discuss transfer successes and challenges. The topics identified by these leaders will contribute to the development of a common agenda and objectives for future discussion, action, and evaluation.

- Design topic-focused workshops where cross-sector teams can come together to gain knowledge from experts and create their own implementation plans to take back to their community. Peer support networks and measurement milestones would be established to guide the implementation work on individual campuses

**Commitment 2:** Build clear educational and career pathways through alignment among K-12, community colleges, and universities - with attention to the STEM areas.

- Each of the individual associations have initiatives or advocacy underway that work toward better alignment among the groups - e.g., support for education standards, STEM teacher preparation, increasing the numbers of underrepresented males in STEM, and the reinvention of developmental education. With this new commitment, the associations will connect these association efforts to identify gaps and achieve greater overall impact.

**Commitment 3:** Develop and disseminate improved metrics of student progress and success for use by member institutions and work toward adoption at both the federal and state levels.

- The associations will continue their individual and joint outreach efforts to increase the numbers of member institutions participating in the Student Achievement Measure (SAM) project. The initiative is a comprehensive web-based measure of student progress and completion that was jointly created by APLU, AASCU, AACCC, and the three other presidential higher education associations as a more accurate metric to the federal graduation rate.
- In early January, the three associations will release a strategic framework to guide discussion and the creation of measurement tools for reporting student outcomes after college. The framework is intended to guide the development of more specific metrics that can be tested and implemented by colleges and universities.
- The associations will develop a common data policy agenda to guide the establishment and dissemination of a set of metrics and reporting tools that more accurately describe and document the matriculation, progress, and outcomes of today's college students for use by institutions, policy-makers, and consumers to make decisions.