

## Investing in Students' College Completion

Over the past several decades, public universities have made critical strides in increasing access to higher education for historically underserved populations, including first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income households. Yet for too many students, college access hasn't always translated into earning a degree. [Two-thirds](#) of students who enroll at four-year public universities earn a degree within six years, including those attending part-time.

Policymakers can invest in getting more students across the finish line. The [American Families Plan](#) and Biden administration Fiscal Year 2022 [budget proposal](#) has called for a \$62 billion investment over 10 years to establish a new College Completion Fund, designed to provide grants to states and tribes to support success and completion efforts at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. Based on this proposal, the U.S. House of Representatives Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Reconciliation bill includes \$9 billion to create a new federal program to support student retention and completion efforts at America's colleges and universities.

This first-of-its-kind federal investment would complement existing federal investments in college access, directing critical new resources to ensure students make it through their degree program and successfully transition into the workforce. Yet as lawmakers continue work on the reconciliation bill, this investment could easily be further reduced or eliminated entirely.

Public universities have spent years creating and testing solutions to help students succeed in college, complete their degrees, and be well-prepared for the workforce. These efforts have achieved significant success at individual institutions, but have not yet been fully brought to scale across the higher education sector. A large-scale federal investment designed to both expand the evidence base for completion strategies and turbocharge the scaling of best practices could make a significant difference for students who stand to gain [life-changing economic security and prosperity](#) from completing a college education.

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**67%**  
of students earn a degree  
within six years.

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is dedicated to [expanding student access, success, and completion](#) in higher education, a commitment that is reflected in the research conducted in partnership with APLU's member institutions. Through this ongoing research, we have identified a range of evidence-based and promising practices to promote college completion. Through its annual [Degree Completion Award](#), APLU recognizes members doing [exemplary work](#) to retain and graduate students. The federal College Completion Fund has the potential to grow the evidence base for effective completion strategies and scale what works across the higher education sector. Below are some innovative student success efforts APLU and its members have identified as high-impact practices.

## REMOVING AFFORDABILITY BARRIERS

Affordability still remains a barrier to completing a degree for many students. Institutions have tested several low-cost approaches to affordability, including:

- Providing students with small, targeted funds to keep them on track, including [completion and retention grants](#) and emergency financial assistance grants;
- Using targeted [institutional debt forgiveness](#) to reengage students; and
- Investing in affordable [learning materials](#), including open educational resources.

## REIMAGINING TEACHING TO MAXIMIZE STUDENT LEARNING

The science of education has advanced over the years to demonstrate teaching and learning methods that can improve student outcomes. Universities need the resources to adapt these methods, including:

- [Encouraging an environment](#) where every student feels they belong in higher education;
- Redesigning courses to more effectively help students learn;
- Instituting faculty development and support for instructors teaching gateway, general education and transfer students;
- Investing in digital tools like [adaptive courseware](#), online, and blended learning to personalize learning environments;
- Implementing learning analytics and continuous improvement analysis of learning environment success; and
- Using social psychology to develop a sense of belonging to ultimately improve the student experience in the classroom.

## PROVIDING HOLISTIC SUPPORT AND MEETING BASIC STUDENT NEEDS

Underrepresented students face barriers to completion of higher education that stem from background and life circumstances. Their success depends on a more holistic approach to support their learning, including:

- Applying novel approaches to [advising](#) and mentoring;
- Providing [supports for students who transfer](#) institutions to ensure that students do not waste time, credits, and resources;
- Using real-time data on student progress to address academic challenges before they become significant barriers to success; and
- Meeting basic student needs through support for food and nutrition, housing support, transportation, childcare, mental health and other health care services.

## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKFORCE AND POST-COLLEGIATE SUCCESS

Completing a degree is only part of the journey to capturing the economic benefit from higher education. Students need information and opportunities that will help them transition into a career even while they are completing their degree. For example:

- Providing more comprehensive career coaching and networking;
- Partnering with industry to expand paid experiential learning opportunities such as internships, coops, and apprenticeships; and
- Clarifying, in partnership with industry, the pathways that lead to economically and intellectually rewarding careers.

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## ABOUT APLU

APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. With a membership of 244 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations, APLU's agenda is built on the three pillars of increasing degree completion and academic success, advancing scientific research, and expanding engagement. Annually, its 201 U.S. member campuses enroll 4.2 million undergraduates and 1.2 million graduate students, award 1.2 million degrees, employ 1.1 million faculty and staff, and conduct \$46.8 billion in university-based research.

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