

**Testimony before the United State House of Representatives
Education and the Workforce Committee**

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Introduction

Over the course of the last five years, Complete College America has worked with 33 states and the District of Columbia with a single mission in mind: increase the number of Americans with a college degree or credential of value and close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

This critical work has been driven by the reality that America faces a staggering college completion crisis, and a failure to act decisively on these issues would yield an ongoing skills gap that threatens our economic future and degrades our intellectual leadership around the world.

A look at the numbers shows just how serious this challenge is for our country: only 4% of full-time students complete an associate degree on time, that is, within 2 academic years. At non-flagship, four-year institutions, only 19% complete their degree on time. Even given 3 years for an associate degree and 6 years for a bachelor's, these numbers only increase to 13% and 45% respectively. For part-time students, the results are even lower.

Further, despite great successes in the college access agenda, a closer look at graduation day reveals that those who do eventually earn degrees are not representative of the rich diversity that defines this nation. The hopes raised by nearly equitable enrollments in the freshman class for students of color, low-income students, and first generation students are crushed by persistent gaps in achievement and completion.

Taken together, this crisis costs our nation and the states billions of dollars, contributes to the more than \$1 trillion in student loan debt, and stifles economic growth.

Admittedly, the mission to boost college completion and success is a difficult one – requiring an analysis of every facet of higher education structure and delivery. More important, success demands the sober recognition that, at the most basic level, what we are intending to accomplish is a reinvention of centuries-old institutions that now must change to help ensure the success of students who have rarely succeeded in the past.

But this difficult work is necessary and bold reform is required if we hope to keep not just access to college, but the degree being pursued, within reach for many more Americans.

Traditional Remediation: A Roadblock to College Completion

In 2012, Complete College America released a landmark report, entitled *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere*, which focused specifically on the issue of remedial education, highlighting a system in desperate need of reform.

The facts are clear: of community college students assigned to remedial education, only one in 10 will earn their associate degree within three years. Further, 70% of students placed into remedial math fail to even attempt a college-level gateway course within two academic years.

These dismal results have been the norm for decades, and each year, hundreds of thousands of students find themselves condemned to this system, which allows far too many to fall through the cracks. As a result, while these students are enrolled in college, their access to college-level work is being denied.

In redesigned programs throughout the country, institutions are shifting remedial education from a prerequisite requirement to a corequisite, where students receive support while enrolled in the gateway courses. By delivering corequisite remediation with more time on task and just in time support, we place far more students into their programs of study and eliminate attrition points - the moments where students are most likely to fall out of the system. Additionally, these programs are achieving astounding results, often two, three, and four times that of the traditional model.

Essential Considerations

- **Make enrollment in college-level courses the default for many more students.** Research has shown that many more students can succeed in college-level gateway courses with additional support than are currently placed into them.
- **Use a placement range, not a single cut score** to start most underprepared students in college-level courses with corequisite academic support, within which 75 percent or more of those students can succeed.
- **Align mathematics to programs of study.** Placement in college algebra should not be the required mathematics for all when statistics or quantitative literacy would be more appropriate for many programs of study.

Additional Areas for Reform

Thanks to extensive research, we know the obstacles to student success. In addition to poorly designed and delivered remedial courses, we face a culture that rewards enrollment rather than completion, broken credit transfer policies, overwhelming and unclear choices for students, and a system out of touch with the needs of

students who must balance work and family with their coursework. The strategies necessary to address these challenges are proven.

- **Performance Funding** Pay for performance, not just enrollment. Using CCA and NGA metrics, tie state funding to student progression through programs and completion of degrees and certificates. Include financial incentives to encourage the success of low-income students and production of graduates in high-demand fields.
- **Full-Time is 15** Incentivize students to attend full-time and ensure that full-time means 15 credits per semester. Use banded tuition, so 15 credits per semester costs students no more than taking 12 credits. Cap degree requirements (120 for bachelor's and 60 for associate) to ensure degrees can be completed on time. Ensure college credits can be transferred.
- **Structured Schedules** Help working students balance jobs and school by using structured scheduling of classes which adds predictability to their busy lives – doing so enables many more students to attend college full-time, shortening their time to completion.
- **Guided Pathways to Success** Enabled by technology, default all students into highly structured degree plans, not individual courses. Start students in a limited number of 'meta majors,' which narrow into majors. Map out every semester of study for the entire program, and guarantee that critical path courses will be available when needed. Use built-in early warning systems to alert advisers when students fall behind to ensure efficient intervention.

Actions Congress Can Take Now

- **Address gaps in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).** The current data collection system does not fully capture the needs of today's students. Data is currently not available regarding part-time students, transfer students, students aged 25 or older, gateway course success for remedial students, credit accumulation, time to degree, course completion, and most importantly, the system does not track PELL students. Ultimately, IPEDS data does a very poor job of counting all students.
- **Incentive students to take 15 credits per semester.** Based on a recent survey conducted by Postsecondary Analytics, most "full-time" students are not taking the credits needed to graduate on time. Federal and state policies should encourage students to take at least 15 credits per semester or 30 credits per year.