

# **COMPLETE COLLEGE** AMERICA

**Testimony before the United States House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training**

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***Time is Money...and the Enemy of College Completion:  
Transform American Higher Education  
To Boost Completion and Reduce Costs***

## **Executive Summary**

- A new American majority of students is emerging on college campuses. These students must often delicately balance long hours at jobs they must have with the higher education they desire. Approximately 40% of all American college students today feel they can only manage to attend part-time. And just one-quarter of American college students attend full-time at residential colleges.
- Even though this emerging majority has fundamentally different needs, American higher education in general has been slow to change, continuing to deliver courses and programs designed decades ago and best suited for full-time, residential students.
- To achieve the substantial gains in college completion America must have to compete, we must reinvent American higher education. To do so, requires significant shared responsibility by all stakeholders, including government. More of the same will not do.
- Historic data has proven that time is the enemy of college completion: the longer it takes to graduate, the less likely one is to do so. And more time on campus means more is spent on college, adding high costs as another cause for dropping out.
- Time, choice and structure are the essential optics through which all higher education reforms must be viewed in order to maximize the likelihood of graduating more of today's students.
- Successful, large-scale programs and systems around the country have proven that by utilizing informed choice and structured delivery, students can successfully balance jobs and school – and are much more likely to graduate.
- States, as the leading investors in higher education, have the power and authority to demand more from higher education – and they have a moral obligation to do so.
- By utilizing the NGA/CCA Common College Completion Metrics, yawning gaps in current data collection will be filled and states will be empowered with new tools to hold higher education accountable and inform reform design.
- Congress can seize key opportunities to encourage states, incent needed reforms, and signal its clear interest in more college graduates, not just enrollments.

## Introduction

Measured on the first day of classes each fall, higher education in America appears to be a roaring success. In most communities, our campuses are bursting at the seams with eager students. More important, colleges have nearly erased racial gaps in enrollment: According to a 2003 US Department of Education report, 83% of whites pursue higher education in the first eight years after high school – and 80% of blacks and Hispanics do the same.

We have clearly convinced almost all of our young people that for good jobs and a brighter future there is one irrefutable fact: high school isn't high enough. Our colleges provide most of the open doors and essential ladders to the greater opportunities and higher achievement young people desire.

There's no disputing that a generation or more of sustained efforts – while unfinished – have yielded impressive gains in access. But, access without success is an empty promise – and a missed opportunity with severe economic consequences for students, states and our country.

With so much at stake, how is America doing? Barely more than half of full-time students graduate with 4-year bachelor's degrees in *six years* – and fewer than three in ten pursuing 2-year associate degrees at our community colleges graduate in *three years!* Sadly, part-time students graduate at even lower rates.

To make matters worse, a closer look on graduation day reveals that those eventually receiving degrees look very different than the student body on the first day of class: the hopes raised by nearly equitable enrollments are crushed by long persistent gaps in achievement and completion.

Given projections that two-thirds of all jobs in 2020 will require advanced training or education, we simply have no choice: We must get more of our students – from all walks of life – to graduation day.

Many argue that it is the significant cost of higher education that is the greatest obstacle to student success. If we simply cut tuition and fees, they claim, our country can significantly boost college graduations.

While it is true colleges must become more efficient and tuition more affordable, we will not regain our intellectual leadership in the world without new policies, legislation and strategies to reduce the time it takes students to complete degrees and certificates.

Historic data has now proven that time is the enemy of college completion, not just tuition. Today's college students are dramatically different than those of the past: most now commute to campus, balancing jobs, school and often family.

Yet higher education has done little to adjust to the changing needs of this new majority. The result: students are spending longer than ever in college. The longer it takes, the more life gets in the way, and the less likely it is that one will ever graduate. More time on campus means more is spent on college, adding high costs as another driver of dropping out. Simply put: time is money.

### **A New Reality for an Emerging Majority on Campus: Time is the Enemy**

Why does America have such abysmal completion rates? Of the many reasons offered, one compelling fact stands above all others: Today, most students balance the jobs they must have with the higher education they desire.

Today's college student is a far cry from the American archetype of the 19 year-old college kid who lives on campus, attends full-time, doesn't work, and gets most of his bills paid by Mom and Dad. In fact, only 25% of college students in our country today attend residential schools.

What's the new reality? According to a recent study by Public Agenda, nearly half of students at 4-year schools work more than 20 hours a week. At community colleges, 60% are at jobs more than 20 hours a week, and a quarter of these stressed out students are working more than 35 hours. Nearly 40% of all of our college kids attend part-time. Roughly a quarter of them have children of their own to support. And yet they still find a way to come to college to pursue better lives.

With so much at stake, today's students need to finish their studies as soon as possible to get on with life. They need clear pathways to quality degrees and career certificates in order to land the good jobs they desperately want. And they must have predictable schedules they can count on in order to balance jobs and school. Why is this so important? Because the more time college takes, the more life intrudes. And when more life intrudes, fewer students complete college.

## **The Completion Cornerstones: Time, Choice and Structure**

For years, adding time and more choices have been our answers. Semester long, multiple-level remediation courses, limitless periods of exploration before declaring a major, and midnight courses are all examples of well-intended efforts to try and meet student needs. When coupled with other policies like additional credit requirements or transfer rules that don't readily recognize credits earned at multiple campuses, the result has been to lengthen the time to degree for many students—or hinder degree completion altogether.

The numbers make it clear: When it comes to college graduation, time is the enemy. According to federally collected data in 2008, only 29% of full-time students at public 4-year institutions graduated on time. After the fifth year of pursuing a Bachelor's degree, 19% more graduated.

Now consider the sixth and eighth years after enrollment: Only 6% then 3% more students made it to graduation day, respectively. Giving students more time to graduate does not yield many more graduates. Why? Simply put, life gets in the way.

Today's students need less time on campus, fewer confusing choices and more structured schedules. Time, choice and structure are the key issues to address the needs of today's students and the optics through which efforts to boost completion must be viewed.

### ***Directed Choice Yields More Graduates***

More time and uninformed choice work against college completion. To understand why, we must again consider the nature of today's college students – and human nature, in general.

Respected researcher and educator, James Rosenbaum, of Northwestern University, and his colleagues have found that students at 2-year colleges in America, which now make up nearly half of all college kids today, often lack the know-how to direct their own progress. Further, their work revealed that although students “are assumed to be capable of making informed choices, of knowing their abilities and preferences, of understanding the full range of college and career alternatives, and of weighing the costs and benefits associated with different college programs, our analyses show that many students have great difficulty with such choices.” The fact that on average one college guidance counselor is matched with 700 students in this country doesn't help the situation.

While public 2-year colleges design their programs and procedures based on faulty assumptions about the capability of their students to make informed choices, Rosenbaum

found that their private counterparts often do not. According to him and his fellow researchers, many private 2-year colleges – with identical student bodies containing large numbers of low-income and minority students who did poorly in high school– shift academic planning responsibilities to themselves, “devising procedures to help students succeed even if they lack the traditional social prerequisites of college.” And it works: Rosenbaum found that the private 2-year schools in his study graduate significantly more students than their public peers.

How do they do it? The private 2-year colleges in the study offered students “package deal” plans for accomplishing their specific academic and career goals in a clear length of time. Instead of charting their own paths by navigating daunting catalogs overflowing with choices, students make the “big choice” of a desired career or academic discipline and then the colleges make all of the “little choices” for them by utilizing structured programs that move students to degrees in the shortest time possible. (See Appendix A to review Rosenbaum’s findings.)

Before assuming that only private colleges can accomplish this, consider the tremendous success of the past twenty years at the public Tennessee Technology Centers. Part of the Tennessee Board of Regents system, the statewide Technology Centers have been regularly accomplishing graduation rates of 75% or higher and job placement rates above 85%.

Their approach shares many common elements with private schools: Students sign up for whole programs, not individual courses. They are clearly told how long the program will take to complete, the likelihood of success, and the total “all in” costs. There are plenty of “big choices,” but the “small choices” are directed, streamlined and packaged to cut down on confusion and the chance of mistake.

So, this isn’t about public versus private 2-year schools. It’s about divining an uncharted course through a catalog of undirected choices on one’s own versus fully informed choices with clear expectations and benefits.

Nor is it just about college students—it’s about what the abundance of choice does to the human brain. In one famous study, subjects became nearly paralyzed when presented with 24 choices of fruit jams. While 60% helped themselves to samples, only 3% could ever decide which jam to buy. By reducing the choices to just 6, researchers observed that nearly a third of the 40% who sampled the jams made a purchase. Whether choosing jams, bath soaps, investment plans, or college courses, directed choice can be a great benefit to consumers.

As important as direction, the best choices are those most closely aligned with intentions: Students come to college in pursuit of better lives, higher-paying jobs and clearer paths to accomplish their goals. They simply seek the fastest, most affordable route to do so – and most don't enjoy the luxuries of endless time and resources to get there.

### ***Add Structure to Achieve the Full Potential of Reforms***

By choosing to think differently about choice, colleges can meet the needs of more of today's students and share in the success that comes with more graduates. But, combining directed choice with new structures for academic delivery unleashes the full potential of reforms to boost college completions.

To understand why, return again to what it's all supposed to be about: students. It's clear that too many students work too many hours. That's unlikely to change unless college suddenly becomes a lot more affordable.

So, let's consider again the lives of young adults who try to keep it all going. At almost all colleges, courses are scheduled all over the weekly calendar. In a student-centered culture, would programs be designed that required an 8:00 a.m. class on Monday, a 2:00 p.m. class on Tuesday, 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, etc.? Of course not.

Instead, what if programs were designed utilizing more structured scheduling? Students could attend classes every day, five days a week, from 8:00 a.m. to noon or from 1:00 until 5:00 p.m. Full-time attendance would now be possible for many more, dramatically shortening the time it takes to graduate. And finding time for jobs in such a predictable daily routine is no longer a challenge.

When presented with this concept, students are incredulous. "That would be a dream come true," they have told us. Here again, the dream is actually a tried-and-true reality.

Not only do the hugely successful Tennessee Technology Centers help direct student choices, they also structure academic delivery in just this way. Three-quarters or more of their students earn career certificates in twelve to eighteen months going full-time, five days a week, from 8:00 until 2:00. Every year over 12,000 students move through the multiple Technology Center campuses and nearly all of them head straight into jobs.

Structure also produces some added bonuses that should not be overlooked. Compressed class schedules create stronger linkages between faculty members – and cohort-like connections between students. Professors not only interact more often, they also tend to

create team approaches to teaching the students they share. And students often move through programs as a group, strengthening their ties and support of one another.

But, structured scheduling only works for vocational education and career certificate programs, right? Wrong. The City University of New York (CUNY) has a program (ASAP) for accelerated completion of associate degrees that is so successful the system will soon open an entire campus designed to utilize block scheduling, student cohorts, directed choice, embedded remediation and reinvented supports. Why make this kind of significant investment in the midst of a budget crisis? Because it works so well: ASAP students graduate on-time at more than twice the rate of their peers.

Time, choice and structure: to significantly boost college completions, turn the broken dreams of dropouts into the bright futures of graduates, fully seize the opportunities for our country that overflowing campuses provide, and make America the world leader again in college attainment, we must keep our collective focus on these three touchstones. They are universal truths arrived at in the best way: by seeing the true nature of our college students today – and opening our minds to accept that to help them succeed – a success that America is counting on – we must reinvent American higher education.

### **States Must Lead the Way**

The stakes are high. That's why we must recognize that higher education institutions themselves are not the only players. One key participant that has too long been on the sideline of higher education reform is state government.

Given that our country has suffered these low graduation rates for a generation or more, it is clear that – in spite of our best intentions – doing more of the same will just get us more of the same. Higher education now must have the committed and shared partnership of all key stakeholders. America – now 12<sup>th</sup> in the world in college attainment and falling – does not have the luxury of time to wait. States must step forward and help lead the way.

There are many compelling reasons for governors, state legislatures and higher education system leaders to assume leadership on this agenda:

- **State Authority**

While state-appointed or elected citizen boards directly govern public institutions, ultimately states are responsible for all public colleges and universities. State goals and state leadership created college systems and expanded open access four-year institutions over the past 50 years; state leadership and support will be necessary to



enhance and sustain their effectiveness in improving college completion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

- **Majority Investor**

By a wide measure, state taxpayers provide the greatest funding for institutions, especially community colleges and open access four-year institutions. No other stakeholder is better positioned than state governments to ensure that public investments are wisely utilized to maximize opportunities for the future economic success of their states.

- **Systemic, Scalable Change**

States are the best positioned to ensure reform across systems and campuses by setting goals, establishing uniform measures, and monitoring progress. They can also serve as the most efficient clearinghouses of best practices, allowing for rapid scaling of successful reforms.

- **Accountability**

With so much at stake economically, states must hold themselves, students, and institutions accountable for success. States have leverage over both governance and the funding mechanisms needed to achieve higher levels of completion.

- **Transparency**

Institutions have strong incentives to shape reporting to mask failure and avoid confronting problems. States are much more likely than individual institutions to share and publish data to drive reform.

- **Economic Development**

Higher education attainment is inextricably linked to future economic success. State leadership will ensure stronger linkages between each state's economic needs and higher education delivery.

- **Mobility of Students**

Today's students move across campuses and systems to attain credentials. Coherent state policy and integrated state strategies are essential for assuring ease of transfer and efficient completion of academic programs.

## **States in Action: Complete College America's Alliance of States**

When it comes to state leadership, there is great reason for optimism. Today, more than half of the states have joined Complete College America's Alliance of States. To do so, Governors and their higher education leadership had to make four key commitments:

- 1) Establish statewide and campus-level college completion goals,
- 2) Adopt the NGA/Complete College America Common Completion Metrics in order to measure progress and hold institutions accountable for results (see Appendix B),
- 3) Create comprehensive statewide and campus-level college completion plans, and
- 4) Move significant legislation and policies to remove unnecessary obstacles and speed student success.

As of this writing, 30 states have made these commitments and are now working as members of the Alliance of States to design and implement strategies that will significantly boost the number of their citizens with college degrees or other credentials of value.

## **Essential Steps for States**

Complete College America recommends several significant policy levers that states can utilize to enhance the likelihood of student success and college completion, including shifting to performance funding, reducing time-to-degree, transforming remediation, restructuring academic delivery, and making career certificates count, among others. Please see Complete College America's *Essential Steps for States* documents for more specifics on what states can do today (Appendix C).

## **Actions Congress Can Take Now**

- 1) Restructure federal investments in higher education to reward states and institutions that implement new strategies and structures to significantly boost college completion, including measures to shorten time-to-degree. As an example, the Community College and Career Training Grants program should incentivize states with unified community college systems and/or community college consortia to restructure delivery to help working students. As shown above, proven models exist that can be replicated and scaled by states and consortia.

- 2) Embed robust progress and completion metrics in all federal higher education policies and statutes. The NGA/CCA Common College Completion Metrics can serve as a strong starting point. These comprehensive metrics allow for accurate state-by-state and institutional comparisons and fill in yawning gaps in current data collection, enhancing opportunities for accountability and empowering all stakeholders with new tools to inform reform design.

## **Conclusion**

Commitments like those made by our Alliance States give us great reason for optimism – and a clear path forward. With a little more help – and a lot of common sense – students, their families, taxpayers, and all Americans will share in the benefits of more individuals completing college.

Complete College America applauds the President and Congress for efforts to make America first in the world again in college completion. And we stand ready to assist in efforts to reinvent higher education to meet the needs of the new emerging American majority of college students. Thank you for this opportunity to be of assistance in this vital effort.

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## **Index of Appendices**

*Provided by hyperlink:*

**A** *College: The Unfinished Revolution* by James Rosenbaum, et.al.

<http://www.issues.org/23.4/rosenbaum.html>

**B** **NGA/CCA Common College Completion Metrics**

[http://www.completecollege.org/path forward/common metrics/](http://www.completecollege.org/path%20forward/common%20metrics/)

**C** **Complete College America's Essential Steps for States**

[http://www.completecollege.org/path forward/essential steps for states/](http://www.completecollege.org/path%20forward/essential%20steps%20for%20states/)