State policymakers and education leaders recognize that increasing the share of the population holding a postsecondary certificate or degree is a key factor in creating a competitive edge in the 21st-century economy. To help focus attention on this need and drive change, state and higher education leaders should set goals for increased attainment rates and develop systems for monitoring progress toward those goals. Information and data about progress help leaders monitor the impact of their policy decisions, identify areas for improvement and target future policies and resources to address needs.

Attainment goal and completion goal are terms that are often used interchangeably but are actually different. An attainment goal refers to the educational levels of state’s population while a completion goal speaks to the credential completion of students enrolled at an institution or group of institutions. To impact a state’s education attainment levels requires the collaboration of all educational institutions and other partners, such as K-12 and workforce. It also requires focusing on the completion of students already enrolled, as well as the engagement, enrollment and completion of new students to meet the broader needs of the state, its workforce and its residents. Attainment goals set the target to which completion goals for postsecondary systems and institutions are aligned. The completion goals may be described as total credentials awarded each year to reach the attainment goal.

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce projects that by 2025, 65 percent of job openings will require some postsecondary education. At the current rate of production, the supply of adequately educated workers will fall short by 5 million by 2020. Lumina Foundation has set a national goal for increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality college degrees, certificates or other credentials to 60 percent by 2025, known as Goal 2025. Several states and

From the experiences of such states and systems, experts are learning how goals and metrics can be used most effectively.

- The goal should be quantifiable. It should include a number or percentage increase that can be quantitatively measured over time.
- The goal should be challenging. It should require “stretching” in that it cannot be easily achieved through population increases.
- The goal should include a long-term target date. It should be tied to a specific date to demonstrate commitment and drive expectation.
- The goal should address closing attainment gaps for underrepresented populations such as minority, low-income and working adult (age 25 and older) populations.
- The goal should be articulated in statute and/or the state’s strategic plan for postsecondary education. It should serve as the overarching framework for the state’s postsecondary strategic plan, budgeting practices and state policy initiatives.
- The goal should be based on an analysis of state workforce needs so that institutions can produce graduates who meet local workforce demand.
- The goal should be embraced by many stakeholders.
higher education systems are using goals and metrics to drive change, and some are already making significant gains.

State Examples

Colorado

In 2012, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education focused its master plan on the primary goal of increasing the percentage of Coloradans ages 24 to 35 who hold high-quality postsecondary certificates or degrees to 66 percent by 2025. The commission recognized that the state was not on track to meet its own workforce needs in the next decade. The commission included four performance goals in its plan: increasing attainment, improving student success, reducing gaps and restoring fiscal balance. Each goal also includes targets and performance metrics. For more information, see Colorado Competes: A Completion Agenda for Higher Education.

Indiana

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education first adopted statewide goals in its 2007 strategic plan, Reaching Higher: Strategic Directions for Higher Education in Indiana. In 2012, the commission released its most recent strategic plan—Reaching Higher, Achieving More—which established the goal of increasing higher education attainment to 60 percent of Indiana’s adult population by 2025 (45 percent by 2018). The plan also created completion and degree production goals. Recognizing the significant gaps in attainment between white students and minority and low-income student populations, the commission later adopted a resolution committing to cutting the attainment gap in half by 2018 and eliminating it by 2025. Further, the resolution requests that the commission annually report on progress and completion rates for different student populations in annual college readiness and completion reports. Finally, the resolution also commits to requesting that individual institutions set targets for closing gaps in completion rates and report them to the commission for inclusion in an annual completion report.

Tennessee

In 2010, the Complete College Tennessee Act committed the state to increasing the percentage of its citizens with college degrees. To support this goal, Governor Bill Haslam announced the “Drive to 55” initiative in January 2013 setting a statewide attainment goal of 55 percent by 2025, which includes a policy agenda and public communications strategy. Since then, the governor has traveled the state, meeting with various leaders and stakeholder groups to build bipartisan policymaker support and widespread public support for the state attainment goal and related initiatives. The governor is also supporting specific initiatives aimed at building system capacity and using resources more efficiently and effectively.

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