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Why State Leadership Matters for Improving Access to Higher Education

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As President Barack Obama and the U.S. Department of Education continue their rollout of initiatives aimed at improving college attainment, it's easy to believe that the federal government has the primary responsibility for higher education. While the federal government invests considerable resources in student financial aid – the president is merely working around the edges: the lion's share of strategies and policies to shepherd students from the K-12 system into higher education are created at the state, not federal, level. The fifty states are largely moving in different directions, and few state leaders are effectively facing the extraordinary challenges that limit college enrollment and completion. For businesses, this failure in state leadership often means an inadequately trained workforce. For far too many students, it means an American Dream that is increasingly out of reach.

The massive surge in college costs in recent years is one signal that our state leaders are failing in their duty to create and maintain environments that provide all students — regardless of demographic background — the opportunity to access and complete high quality, affordable higher education. Most state higher education decisions are made by the states. Yet, most states fall short of the serious work necessary to ensure equal access and opportunities to succeed.

About a third (34 percent) of adults age 25 to 34 now hold at least a bachelor's degree, up from just 23 percent in 1990. This is good news. Not all jobs require a bachelor's degree but, increasingly, available jobs now and into the future require some education beyond high school.

Nonetheless, considerable differences in higher education attainment persist based on race/ethnicity and other demographic characteristics. In 2013, only 20.5 percent of Blacks, 15.7 percent of Hispanics, and 16.6 percent of American Indian/Alaska Natives between the ages of 25 and 29 had attained at least a

bachelor's degree, compared with 40.4 percent of Whites and 60.1 percent of Asians.

And these gaps are widening: differences in degree attainment between both Blacks and Whites and Hispanics and Whites grew by 7 percentage points between 1990 and 2013. These growing differences are particularly worrisome given the changing demographic characteristics of our nation. Hispanics, the group with the lowest average educational attainment, are among the nation's fastest growing racial/ethnic groups.

States can improve the educational attainment of their populations through policies that ensure that college is affordable, that high-quality higher education options are available to all state residents, and that students can move from K-12 schools into higher education institutions and transfer among higher education institutions without needing to complete remedial or duplicative coursework.

In our in-depth examination of the relationship between state policy and educational attainment, we found that all five of our study states (Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Washington) have numerous policies in place that are somehow related to college preparation, participation, completion, and affordability. But, we also found that states must have more than just a piecemeal collection of policies if they are to make meaningful progress in raising overall higher education attainment and closing gaps in attainment.

State leaders must prioritize educational attainment and closing gaps across groups with the same zeal they approach business development or the economy. To do this, they must strategically use available fiscal resources to ensure college affordability, effectively move students through educational systems and institutions, and encourage institutions to innovate and collaborate to serve all students and meet the needs of state employers.

The states also need to make sure their policies create a level playing field for higher education opportunity. When a state fails to ensure that college is affordable, that high-quality postsecondary educational options are available, and that students are academically prepared to enter and succeed in college,

students from low-income families and racial/ethnic minority groups are disproportionately disadvantaged, and the gaps in attainment continue to widen.

The challenges to closing gaps in attainment across groups are many. But growing gaps in higher education attainment leave the U.S. and individual states at a competitive disadvantage, diminish the middle class, and contribute to growing economic and social inequality. The time for a more comprehensive approach—one spearheaded by state policy leaders—is now.



About the Author

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