

AMERICAN ACADEMY  
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

FOR STATE  
POLICY-MAKERS

# THE FUTURE OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

THE FUTURE OF AMERICA

*Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education*

# OVERVIEW

## AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

As one of the nation's oldest independent policy research centers and learned societies, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences convenes leaders to address critical challenges facing our global society and provides authoritative and nonpartisan policy advice to decision-makers in government, academia, and the private sector. Since its founding in 1780, the Academy has served the nation as a champion of scholarship, civil dialogue, and useful knowledge.

## COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

The Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education was created by the Academy to examine the current state of American undergraduate education, project the nation's short-term and long-term educational needs, and offer recommendations for strengthening all aspects of undergraduate education. Over a two-year period, the Commission sought advice and consulted with a wide range of groups and individuals, including meeting with two dozen U.S. congressional offices, with over 200 students and faculty from public, private, and for-profit colleges and universities, and with numerous experts around the country. The Commission also published a series of papers on topics ranging from student financial aid to college teaching to the economic impact of increasing college completion rates.

## THE FINAL REPORT

The Commission's final report, *The Future of Undergraduate Education, The Future of America*, is the culmination of a long process of research and deliberation. As the report states: **what was once a challenge of quantity in American undergraduate education, of enrolling as many students as possible, is increasingly a challenge of educational quality—of making sure that all students receive the education they need to succeed, that they are able to complete the studies they begin, and that they can do all of this affordably, without mortgaging the very future they seek to improve.** In this final report, the Commission offers a comprehensive national strategy with recommendations to achieve this goal.

## STATE POLICY-MAKER PRIORITIES

The report recognizes the need for willing partners from federal and state governments, from colleges and universities, from business and industry, and from philanthropy and other entities to help achieve these goals. The recommendations that follow are directed toward state leaders and policy-makers. **The full report and a report brief are available at [www.amacad.org/cfue](http://www.amacad.org/cfue).**

The greatest benefits of an undergraduate education for students and the country derive from earning a credential and not simply from attendance. Students who do not graduate are often wasting the scarce resources of money and time. And taxpayer-funded education institutions, subsidies, and scholarships are not as effective as they might be. **State leaders should develop policies to improve completion of quality college credentials.**

The majority of those who go to college attend their local public higher education institutions. States continue to have primary responsibility for funding and oversight of these institutions. Given ongoing fiscal pressures, state leaders must focus on directing resources to the highest priorities and controlling the cost of regulatory compliance to ensure state higher education institutions can adequately fulfill their missions and increase college affordability.

**Progress is not guaranteed, and good things will happen only with sustained effort, but if we can sustain focus on the work, combining patience with urgency, we can, through undergraduate education, make great advances as individuals and as a nation.**

## STATE POLICY-MAKER PRIORITIES: Completion, Quality, and Affordability

**1** Determine your state's numerical educational attainment goals, communicate and promote these objectives to your residents, and coordinate with colleges, universities, and other public and private entities to achieve these goals. Help set meaningful stretch goals for increasing college completion rates; track improvement by population subgroup by utilizing state longitudinal data systems; and support campuses through targeted institutional allocations and student financial aid.

**2** Make college completion a top state priority using discretionary funds for competitive grants that encourage evidence-based approaches to improving completion, such as promoting informed program choices, limiting excess credits, reducing developmental coursework, improving teaching, and redesigning curricula.

**3** Improve student transfer by working collaboratively with college and university leaders, undergirded by an openness to evaluating and recognizing college-level learning that takes place at multiple institutions through various models. Align learning programs and expectations across institutions and sectors through implementing a transferable general education core, defining transfer pathway maps within popular disciplines, and supporting transfer-focused advising systems that help students.

**4** Ensure that public institutions are provided with adequate funding to fulfill their missions, in particular those that serve the most disadvantaged students. Given fiscal pressures on states and on state-run colleges and universities, it is essential that both government decision-makers and leaders on campus direct resources to the highest priorities.

**5** Direct scarce resources to the students for whom they will have the greatest impact. Carefully weigh the balance of funding across types of public institutions, recognizing the distinctive contributions made by research universities, regional comprehensives, and community colleges. Every state should attend effectively to the needs of its most disadvantaged students, wherever they enroll.

**6** Prioritize meeting the financial need of highly disadvantaged students in state-run student aid programs.

Without additional funding to supplement federal grant assistance, many qualified students may be unable to attend the public flagship or even a nearby community college.

**7** Work with colleges and universities toward improved alignment between funding and program completion. Performance-based funding systems are showing mixed results. Continue to evaluate these systems and modify them based on evidence of effectiveness and unintended consequences.

**8** Coordinate state agencies in developing comprehensive student support strategies to help students facing social and personal challenges, ranging from homelessness and food insecurity to childcare, psychological challenges, and imprisonment.

**9** Assess institutional effectiveness and guide behavior based on desired practices and outcomes for students rather than focusing primarily on educational inputs. Track institutional and program performance on priority outcomes such as graduation rates, student debt default and loan repayment rates, and job placement/job success or further education outcomes.

**10** Reduce compliance costs and better target resources by applying more thorough institutional review to chronically poor performers and rewarding strong performers by reducing the frequency and scope of regulatory review processes. Reporting requirements should be simplified where possible and better targeted to control bad actors and to assess the quality of new entrants into higher education.

**11** Consolidate and streamline confusing regulations, review and reduce unfunded mandates where appropriate, and eliminate extraneous and tangential rules while retaining and where possible improving worthwhile consumer protections.

**12** Invest in a research and development strategy that increases knowledge regarding new models for designing, delivering, and assessing student learning. Share and disseminate results across institutions and among researchers.

# Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education

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