

AMERICAN ACADEMY  
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

FOR COLLEGE &  
UNIVERSITY LEADERS

# 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.

## COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY LEADER PRIORITIES

The report recognizes the need for willing partners from colleges and universities, from federal and state governments, from business and industry, and from philanthropy and other entities to help achieve these goals. The recommendations that follow are directed toward college and university leaders. **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. **Through investments in providing students with consistently good teaching and cocurricular experiences, colleges and universities can improve student learning, satisfaction, and completion of quality credentials.**

By improving timely progression to degree completion, providing greater cost transparency, supporting cost-saving innovation, directing financial assistance based on need, and adopting proven strategies for teaching and assisting students in technology-enabled and team-taught environments, colleges and universities can 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.**

## COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY LEADER PRIORITIES: Quality, Completion, and Affordability

- 1** Make a systemic commitment to the improvement of college teaching, a commitment that will most likely require regularly reviewing faculty teaching practices; analyzing the faculty incentive system; making mentoring and other structured resources available to faculty throughout their teaching careers; and including teaching quality as a key part of tenure evaluation and contract renewal decision-making processes.
- 2** Master's and doctoral programs that produce college teaching faculty should integrate meaningful and explicit teacher-training opportunities. Good teaching practice requires several forms of professional knowledge: fundamental subject-matter knowledge; teaching skills that transfer across disciplines; discipline-specific instructional skills; and culturally relevant teaching practices.
- 3** Provide nontenure-track faculty with stable professional working environments and careers. Make more teaching positions full-time with longer-term contracts and a clear voice in governance; support and better integrate faculty who teach on a part-time basis; and ensure that faculty from diverse backgrounds are equitably represented across all instructional categories.
- 4** Ensure that all college credentials incorporate academic, career, and civic knowledge and skills as a foundation for rewarding and productive lives and careers. Undergraduate learners need meaningful opportunities to develop and integrate knowledge and skills in the classroom and through cocurricular experiences to help them improve their economic prospects, effectively navigate their personal and public worlds, and continue to learn throughout their lifetimes.
- 5** Bring together students from different backgrounds to create intellectual and social connections in ways that sustain and enrich American democracy. Encourage active listening, discussion, and debate on controversial topics informed by the rigors of reason and evidence.
- 6** Develop more reliable measures of student learning gains to provide a critically important measure of college value.
- 7** Experiment with strategies for teaching and supporting students in online, "hybrid," technology-supported, and team-taught environments. Assess the effectiveness of these strategies and help instructors adopt promising formats.
- 8** Make completion a top institutional priority, with the full engagement of faculty and staff. Interventions should be integrated into coherent, scalable efforts that entail the collection and use of student-level data; the provision of personalized, active guidance for students; and an emphasis on assisting students from groups with the lowest completion rates.
- 9** Work toward a new understanding of and approach to student transfer and be open to evaluating, recognizing, and applying college-level learning that takes place at multiple institutions through various models.
- 10** Develop employer partnerships, which can improve college completion rates and help students understand the relevance of their education to future employment, develop important workplace skills, and explore potential careers.
- 11** Manage costs and direct scarce resources smartly to achieve more equitable access and increase completion. Invest in providing students with consistently good teaching to improve learning, satisfaction, and completion; build governance practices that support cost-saving innovation; reduce costs per graduate through timely progression to degree completion; and direct financial assistance to students who need it.
- 12** Provide all college-going students and their families with easy access to accurate and relevant information to inform their college choices, including the actual costs of the academic program to student and family, the likelihood of completing the program, and the prospects for employment or further education after graduation.
- 13** Advance the cause of better precollege education to improve college readiness, reduce the need for remediation, and increase college persistence and completion.

# Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education

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