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Degree Completion Rates Are a Disgrace

By the editors

What is your favorite campus doing to make sure students graduate instead of just passing through?

Time for a quiz. Line up 100 average American students just entering ninth grade. How many of them, would you guess, will have a college diploma and a job requiring a college degree ten years later?

The depressing answer: only 16 percent. And that time frame includes a couple extra years for catch-ups and re-dos. The proportion of young Americans reaching today's idealized finish line in the "standard" eight years would be even lower. Our high-school to college to career pipeline is very, very leaky.

If you break down the statistics just for their time at college, you'll see that four out of ten students who enroll at a four-year school end up with no degree even after six full years. Among the students who start at a two-year college, fully three quarters have no diploma of any kind six years later. Overall, only about half of the folks who start college of any sort walk away with a completed credential.

And despite today's strong rhetorical push and heavy spending for college, our abysmal completion rates are not improving. "College attendance rates have risen steadily in the United States for the past two decades," writes Harvard professor David Deming. Yet "bachelor's degree attainment has not improved at all." The fraction of young people holding a B.A. or B.S. today is actually lower today than it was 20 years ago, and about the same as it was 40 years ago.

If you zero in on problem populations, the picture gets even uglier. Among low-income, first-college-in-their-family students, only 11 percent have a degree six years after enrolling in a four-year program. Most of them will have accumulated something else, though: a load of debt. That not only drags them down, but also hurts taxpayers, because 45 percent of college dropouts default on their federal student loans.

As suggested in the essay prior to this one, some of those dropouts probably shouldn't have headed to campus in the first place. They ought to have been offered a different pathway to work and self-reliance where they were better equipped to succeed. Philanthropists could be extremely useful in helping to design, launch, and spread such alternate career paths.

There are also things donors can do to reduce non-completion rates among students who do enroll. With backing from givers like the Lumina Foundation, 11 large public universities are now experimenting with various strategies to help struggling students turn their tassel. The University

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Innovation Alliance includes Arizona State, Georgia State, Iowa State, Michigan State, Oregon State, Purdue, Ohio State, University of California Riverside, University of Central Florida, University of Kansas, and the University of Texas at Austin. It is testing things like small grants to make up tuition shortfalls, enhanced career guidance that help students envision their route from classroom to a job, predictive analytics that help universities identify students who are struggling, and strong advisory relationships for students at risk of quitting.

Funders such as the Bechtel Foundation and the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation are backing nonprofits like Bottom Line, College Forward, First Graduate, and Students Rising Above—all of which closely monitor, advise, and guide first-generation college students through their college careers. Bottom Line, for example, helps students choose classes, land internships, renew scholarships, and maintain positive attitudes about life challenges. An ongoing randomized control trial funded by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation has so far found that students receiving Bottom Line's help are more likely to stay in college without taking breaks.

Donors are also looking at the remedial classes that many colleges use to try to help students with competency gaps catch up to college-level learning. Many of these classes are ineffective. The Gates Foundation, Ascendium Philanthropy, and the Kresge Foundation have teamed up to redesign remedial classes through the Strong Start to Finish program. So far, their \$8.5 million in grants have gone to help universities in Georgia, Ohio, and New York shape new remedial courses that line up with credit-earning classes and paths to degrees, and give students extra tutoring.

One program that combines many of these solutions to help first-generation students graduate is the ASAP initiative run by City University of



New York. It provides low-income students with dedicated advisers, extra career guidance, tuition waivers, help with books, free subway cards, and other perks. ASAP students take classes together, and must stay enrolled full-time. After doubling graduation rates among its targets, the program is now being replicated at five other schools, thanks to help from Ascendium and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

Until alternatives like these become more widespread and proven, donors might want to push colleges to at least be more open about their actual results, so students and families, funders, and other interested parties understand the risks of non-completion and the issues that need to be overcome. "If the FDA requires labels on food packages to certify ingredients and nutritional value, then universities should be required to publish all their data on how well their students learn, and the employment and career tracks of recent grads," suggested a post from the investment fund run by philanthropist Peter Thiel.

"I have always found it uncomfortable that higher ed tabulated six-year graduation rates, as though that was a satisfactory result," wrote Purdue president Mitch Daniels in early 2019. "The longer one spends in college, the fewer years one has to earn a living and contribute to society. And, of course, the more it costs to finish." Too many schools, Daniels warns, "have been complacent, or even complicit, in policies or practices" that allow large numbers of students to attend college without ever earning a degree. Donors might want to take up his complaint.

