



Getting To and Through College Effective Strategies to Improve College Enrollment and Completion Rates in Texas

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Introduction

College education confers economic and quality of life benefits to both individuals and their families, including higher lifetime earnings and more stable employment. In addition to producing rewards for workers and their families, college enrollment and completion rates impact Texas' economic competitiveness in the global marketplace. Postsecondary education provides the skills necessary to compete with other states and countries for new and better jobs in the knowledge economy.

In 2008, approximately 25% of people over the age of 25 in Texas held at least a bachelor's degree. With a 4.4% average annual increase, Texas substantially increased its associate and bachelor's degree production over the past decade. Despite this progress, Texans at all ages are educated at lower levels than their peers nationally. The Higher Education Coordinating Board reports that Texas will need 4.1 million additional degrees by 2030 to be globally competitive. To achieve this goal, Texas must boost college enrollment and completion rates.

Getting To College

Why College Enrollment Matters

Improving college enrollment is the first step towards improving the number of college graduates in Texas. Research indicates that the higher the degree attained, the higher the economic benefit to individuals and states (see chart on page 2). However, even *some* college education provides economic benefits. For example, a study in Washington found that five years after initial enrollment in a community college, a student who took at least a year's worth of coursework and obtained an occupational certificate earned at least \$1,700 more than a student who completed less than 10 college credits. The earnings difference widened for students who began community college in an ESL program or entered with less than a high

school education. Individuals with at least some postsecondary education also have greater access to on-the-job training opportunities.

In addition to greater earnings capacity, college attendance is associated with improved quality of life for individuals and their families. People who don't attend college have higher poverty rates, lower savings, increased contact with the criminal justice system, poorer health for themselves and their children, higher divorce rates, and decreased educational outcomes for their children. College attendees also have more work opportunities, greater satisfaction with their work, and are more capable of overcoming past economic hardships.

Growth in Median Family Income of Adults Ages 30-39, 1964-2006 (Based on 2006 Dollars)	
Level of Education	Growth in Income
High school degree	7%
Some college	13%
College degree	46%
Advanced degree	76%
<i>Based on Brookings's tabulations of data from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the CPS.</i>	

The benefits of greater college attendance in Texas extend beyond personal and social economic benefits. College attendance produces greater societal benefits as well. For instance, college educated citizens are less likely to rely upon public resources and are more likely to volunteer in their community and make charitable contributions.

Challenges to Improving Enrollment Rates

Of Texas public high school students who graduated in 2009, 56.3% enrolled in college in the fall of 2009. Two significant barriers exist to improving college enrollment rates in Texas: 1) a lack of student preparation, and 2) difficulty in navigating the college enrollment and financial aid processes.

According to Jobs For the Future, only 22% of Texas high school students have the skills necessary to succeed in college. This lack of preparation constrains students' access to and options among four-year colleges. Research suggest three categories of critical skills related to college access and success: 1) content knowledge and basic skills, 2) core academic skills, and 3) non-cognitive skills such as attention span and dependability.

In addition, research shows that for many students, acceptance into college is less of a barrier to enrollment than knowing how to navigate the enrollment and financial aid processes, especially for four-year colleges. This set of challenges is particularly pronounced among low-income, minority, and first-generation college students. Students have difficulty identifying and choosing colleges that meet their academic qualifications and needs. Students and their families often do not know the steps to apply for college and miss important benchmarks necessary for admission. The students experience confusion about the real cost of attendance and overestimate the actual costs, which can cause discouragement to applying or matriculating. In some cases, students and families don't apply for financial aid due to frustration with and intimidation by difficult financial aid processes. Finally, students do not fully understand the value of a college degree.

Effective Strategies to Improve Enrollment Rates

Encourage Challenging Coursework

Encouraging students to pursue challenging coursework in high school can help improve Texas students' access to and success in postsecondary education by raising students' skill levels. Research in Texas suggests that Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate, dual credit, and other advanced coursework are associated with increased college enrollment rates. The Central Texas Student Futures Project found that the odds of college enrollment are 3.5 times higher for students who completed the Distinguished Achievement Program or Recommended High School Plan. Among low-income students, the odds of college enrollment were 4.3 times higher for students who completed the curriculum. The Central Texas Student Futures Project also found that taking college placement exams more than doubled the odds of enrollment at four-year colleges.

An evaluation of a pilot program in Texas found promising results for the provision of financial incentives to underprivileged students and their teachers for achieving passing grades on AP exams. After three years, the use of this program was associated with a 30% increase in the number of students scoring high on SAT and ACT exams and an 8% increase in the number of students attending college.

Texas is currently employing two promising new strategies that may improve student preparation for college-level coursework and reduce barriers to college enrollment. The first new strategy is the Early College High School model, which provides high school students with college credit. This model reduces the cost of a college degree and links students to college at an early age. The second new strategy is the end-of-course (EOC) assessments, which measures students' academic performance in core high school subjects, readiness for advanced high school coursework, college readiness, and the need for developmental coursework in college. Beginning with the freshman class of 2011-2012, the EOC assessments are part of graduation requirements for Texas students and worth 15% of a student's final grade for each course.

Improving qualifications alone, however, will not guarantee increases in college enrollment. Students also need academic environments and support structures that encourage college.

Offer Strong Support for College Search and Application Processes

Helping students identify, evaluate, apply, and select appropriate college options during their junior and senior years increases their likelihood of college enrollment. An evaluation of these efforts at Chicago Public Schools found that students are more likely to be accepted to college if they apply to three or more colleges (3% more likely) and even more likely if they apply to six or more colleges (10% more likely). Providing college identification and application assistance is important for helping student maximize their school choice, especially for underrepresented, high-achieving students.

Foster College-Going Cultures within Schools

One of the strongest predictors of college enrollment is whether students attend a high school where a majority of students go to college. Strong, college-going cultures establish norms for college attendance by consistently articulating the expectation that all students will attend postsecondary school, and providing resources and structured support to achieve that goal. This school-based support is particularly important for first-generation college students whose families often lack the social capital to offer the support at home. In Chicago, schools with a strong college-going culture had 14% more students who enrolled in college than schools with a weak college-going culture. Research on long-term, school-based mentorship programs suggests that these programs may provide an effective way of fostering a college-going culture and increase college enrollment rates.

Help Families Understand and Manage College Costs

Enrollment rates increase when students and their families are provided with access to information and guidance in obtaining financial aid, and support in understanding how to afford college and the true costs of different college options. The Central Texas Student Futures Project found that help completing the FASFA financial aid form more than doubled the odds of college enrollment.

Other research indicates that the costs of education and type of financial aid matter. As the net price of school continues to increase, low-income students are less likely to graduate in four to six years and Hispanic families report increasing discomfort taking out large loans to pay for school.

Need-based grants, scholarships, and work-study programs increase the likelihood of student enrollment and completion more so than loans, tax credits, and merit-based aid. Again, these findings are particularly true for first-generation and low-income students.

Getting Through College

Why College Completion Matters

Earning a college degree provides individuals with better job prospects and higher earnings. On average, college graduates make \$1.2 million more in total salary over their lifetime than non-graduates. These increased earnings help to provide families with increased stability and self-sufficiency.

In addition, higher college completion rates are necessary for Texas and the country to keep pace with demand for skilled workers. Students, however, are taking longer to complete their educations, particularly

If participation and graduation rates remain low, the poverty rate in Texas will increase by 3 percent and the average Texas household income will decline by \$3,000 in constant dollars by 2030.

- *Steve Murdock, Former Chief Demographer, Texas State Data Center*

Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000.

students who begin at two-year colleges and four-year institutions with low graduation rates. By improving college completion rates, Texas can maximize the efficiency of its college resources and help students get the full economic returns of a college education.

Challenges to Improving Completion Rates

In 2009, the six-year graduation rate for Texas public four-year colleges was 55.9%. One challenge to increasing college completion rates is student preparation for college-level work. The burden of addressing the needs of this population often falls upon community colleges. Unfortunately, developmental education as it currently exists often does not adequately address student needs. Only 25% of community college students in developmental education courses earn a degree or certificate within eight years. The persistently low college completion rate among low-income and underrepresented students may also be related to the negative correlation between students who must work during school due to a lack of financial resources and timely college completion.

Strategies to Improve Completion Rates

Foster Cultures of Completion

Research indicates a common theme across colleges with high graduation rates: a strong culture of completion. These colleges report an institutional commitment to completion and a shared sense of responsibility to this goal across campus units. To help foster this culture, colleges report that student retention goals are both concrete and collective.

Offer Pre-orientation Immersion Programs

Based on prior studies, pre-orientation immersion programs can improve completion rates. These intensive, pre-matriculation programs typically target low-income and first-generation college students by bringing them to campus over the summer and helping them integrate into campus life. Students are provided with a series of academic workshops designed to build academic and study skills and to learn collegiate skills such as course registration and scheduling.

Tighten Course Registration Policies

Enrollment policies should provide incentives to students to complete courses. Research suggests that students who withdraw or repeat more than 20% of their courses are 50% less likely to complete college. An example of policies that may negatively impact graduation rates are unlimited withdrawals and withdrawals without penalty.

Offer Performance-Based Scholarship Programs

One of the most successful efforts studied to date are performance-based scholarship programs at community colleges. The Louisiana Scholarship Program, which operates at two community colleges, offers students a \$1,000 reward per semester if they attend school at least half time and earn a minimum 2.0 grade point average for a total of two semesters. An evaluation of the program found that students who receive payments are more likely to enroll full-time, to earn

passing grades in classes, and to remain enrolled.

Create Learning Communities

Research on learning communities provides promising results for completion efforts. These programs strive to develop a sense of cohesion among students by forming cohorts of students who take courses together. This strategy may be particularly important for disadvantaged students who are more likely to feel the draw of family and friends from home and dropout. An evaluation of learning communities at a New York community college shows increases in course attempts and pass rates after one semester, decreases in the time to complete English requirements, and progress through developmental education after three semesters.

Develop Longitudinal Data Systems

School districts should have access to longitudinal data systems capable of linking high school to college outcomes and college outcomes to labor market performance. By linking these data sets together, schools and colleges can track student outcomes over time and across schools and institutions to understand students' progress, performance, and responses to public and private educational interventions.

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