

# Making Opportunity Affordable: Ramping Up Postsecondary Student Success While Containing Costs and Maintaining Quality

A Choicework Discussion Starter created by Public Agenda

---

## INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that the number of college-educated and trained Americans must expand significantly in the coming years in order for the U.S. to remain competitive in the global economy. Moreover, a direct correlation exists between learning and earning: It is increasingly difficult for an individual to earn a family-sustaining wage without some form of postsecondary degree or credential. Finally, considerable disparities in income and career attainment persist across racial and ethnic groups even as the nation's population becomes more diverse, and education is *the* key to leveling the playing field. The following are just a few of the facts that speak to these interrelated imperatives of economic competitiveness, individual opportunity and equity:

- By 2014 the number of jobs requiring some form of postsecondary credential will grow 60 percent faster than the job market as a whole.<sup>1</sup> The most educated American workers are older baby boomers who are beginning to retire, and America currently lags behind at least seven of its competitors in the educational attainment of younger workers.<sup>2</sup>
- The United States ranks near the bottom of industrialized nations in the percentage of entering postsecondary students who complete a degree program<sup>3</sup> and, currently, ours is the only industrialized country where young people are less likely than their parents to earn a high school diploma.<sup>4</sup>
- Approximately 40 percent of traditional undergraduates take at least one developmental/remedial education course<sup>5</sup> and, according to one recent study, only 32 percent of students leave high school academically prepared for college. This percentage is even lower among Black and Hispanic students (20% and 16%, respectively).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Workforce Strategy Center*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development*, January 19, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*. Online: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/topics/Pages/postsecondary-education.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> *The Education Trust*, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of Higher Education*, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Center for Civic Innovation, Manhattan Institute*, 2003. In this report, the authors define being ready for college as having graduated from high school, demonstrating basic literacy by scoring 265 or higher on the reading NAEP, and passing four years of English, three years of math and two years of science, social science and foreign language.

But even as these facts argue for improving college attainment, the cost of providing higher education is increasing sharply, driven by high labor costs, demand for new technologies, greater needs for student services and a variety of other sources. As a result, both operating costs and tuition rates are soaring.

The upshot is that we must find ways to ramp up college access and completion while holding down costs—and we must do so without sacrificing educational quality. (Otherwise, what’s the point?) There is no doubt that meeting this complex challenge will require fresh thinking, tough decisions and increased collaboration on many fronts.

To help us think through some of these issues, this “Choicework Discussion Starter” presents three distinct approaches, each of which suggests a set of concrete strategies. We do not presume that any single approach can serve as a free-standing solution. Rather, this framework seeks to disentangle key elements of this complex challenge in a way that creates space for focused and productive dialogue. It is a device to get a solution-oriented conversation rolling, not a fixed set of boxes into which all possible ideas must be fit. Therefore, it is best viewed simply as a starting point.

Questions to consider in our discussion:

How effective would the different approaches and strategies be for reaching the goal of expanding affordable, cost-effective, high-quality postsecondary opportunities and outcomes? What are the greatest strengths of each approach?

What are the drawbacks, challenges and tradeoffs of the various approaches? Are there tensions between and among the approaches that should be recognized and discussed? Are there any important ideas missing from this framework that are important to add to the discussion?

## **Approach 1: Contain Costs by Changing the Way Colleges and Universities Do Business**

### *The Argument for This Approach*

The culture of higher education institutions has not been, by nature, a culture of efficiency. It has never had to be—until now. Today, tighter budgets for colleges and universities and their rising operating costs are a fact of life. Meanwhile, rising tuition is becoming an obstacle to many students seeking a better education and a better life. In a human- and capital-intensive operation like higher education, cost-saving measures that do not undermine quality can be difficult to find. But find them we must if we are to reach our goal of expanding affordable, cost-effective, high-quality, higher education opportunities.

### *Examples of Strategies*

#### **Make Administrative Practices More Efficient**

- Adopt business practices and technologies to streamline, standardize and automate administrative functions and student support services.
- Apply a “continuous improvement model” that measures cost-effectiveness of administrative practices on a regular basis in order to drive improved efficiency.

#### **Focus the Curriculum**

- Cut particularly expensive low-enrollment majors and those that do not lead to strong career opportunities.
- Create a core curriculum (both within majors and within general education) of carefully aligned required courses and fewer electives, giving students less leeway to take courses that may not apply toward their eventual major or degree program.

#### **Rethink How Curriculum is Delivered**

- Increase the use of technology (for example, in large, lower-division courses) including distance-learning.
- Shift full-time faculty toward course content development and have graduate students or adjunct faculty do more of the classroom teaching, as is being done with greater frequency now in Great Britain.

### *The Dangers and Downsides of This Approach*

- *What are the downsides of this approach and of the strategies suggested here?*
- *Are there certain stakeholders who might object to this approach?*

## **Approach 2: Prepare, Support and Motivate Students to Make Efficient Progress Toward Degree Attainment**

### *The Argument for This Approach*

The real problem is that too many students are not prepared to succeed in a postsecondary learning environment, whether they are just coming out of high school or are returning to college after being in the workforce. As a result, vast numbers of incoming college students fail to complete degrees or earn certificates and the costs of developmental education are soaring. If students entered college ready to succeed, and if there were a well-designed system of supports and incentives in place, most would move through the process efficiently and effectively. This, in turn, would hold down costs for students and institutions alike, while increasing the number of individuals earning the degrees and credentials required for success in today's economy.

### *Examples of Strategies*

#### **Work With K-12 Systems to Improve the College Readiness of High School Students:**

- Improve communication between higher education and K-12 systems to ensure that efforts to align curriculum and provide accelerated learning opportunities (e.g., Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment) actually result in college-readiness.
- Improve communication to ensure that K-12 assessments are actually measuring learning outcomes and, thus, are accurately gauging college readiness.

#### **Strengthen Support Systems for “Non-Traditional” Students**

- Provide academic support through a variety of community, campus, and online literacy, ESL and basic skills programs specifically targeted to adult learners.
- Improve and expand counseling and mentoring programs at community colleges and four-year institutions to help “non-traditional” students successfully navigate the unique challenges they face and achieve their goals.

#### **Improve Supports and Incentives That Help *All* Students Achieve Meaningful Postsecondary Credentials in a Timely Fashion**

- Improve counseling services at middle and high schools, community and technical colleges and four-year colleges to advise students on 21st century career opportunities, requirements for degree or certificate completion, and efficient transitions to other institutions.
- Tie student aid to progress toward degrees so students are encouraged to stay focused and earn meaningful credentials in a timely fashion, and provide tuition rebates for students who complete degrees early.

### *The Dangers and Downsides of This Approach*

- *What are the downsides of this approach and of the strategies suggested here?*
- *Are there stakeholders who might object to this approach?*

## **Approach 3: Revamp Higher Education Systems at the State and Regional Levels to Contain Costs**

### *The Argument for This Approach*

Higher education is organized and governed in statewide and regional systems, and it is at this level where we can find the “levers” that will have the greatest systemic impact on college costs and affordability. The incentives that college systems create often make it more difficult, not less, for institutions to operate and collaborate in ways that hold down costs. No matter what gains are made on other fronts, it is unlikely that soaring tuition and operating costs will be brought under control without states and regions coordinating their higher education systems in ways that increase efficiency.

### *Examples of Strategies*

#### **Create Incentives That Encourage Colleges and Universities to Contain Costs**

- Encourage cost-saving collaborations among institutions, such as sharing well-designed existing programs rather than reinventing and duplicating them, or sharing facilities.
- Tie state funding to learning outcomes and graduation rates, instead of enrollment, so that colleges and universities become more focused on helping students finish their degrees.

#### **Create a More Streamlined and Integrated System**

- Limit the number of research institutions in each state, and have regional colleges and universities focus on teaching.
- Put a cap on the number of students admitted to research institutions, direct more students toward lower-cost options like community colleges, and ensure a seamless transition of credits between institutions across a state or region.

#### **Create New Educational Models to Meet Educational Goals**

- Instead of requiring students to earn credits based on the number of courses they take, create systems that allow students to progress by successfully completing required assessments that measure proficiency or competency.
- Work more closely with the business community and economic development agencies to provide alternative certification programs to meet specific workforce development needs.

### *The Dangers and Downsides of This Approach*

- *What are the downsides of this approach and of the strategies suggested here?*
- *Are there certain types of stakeholders who might object to this approach?*