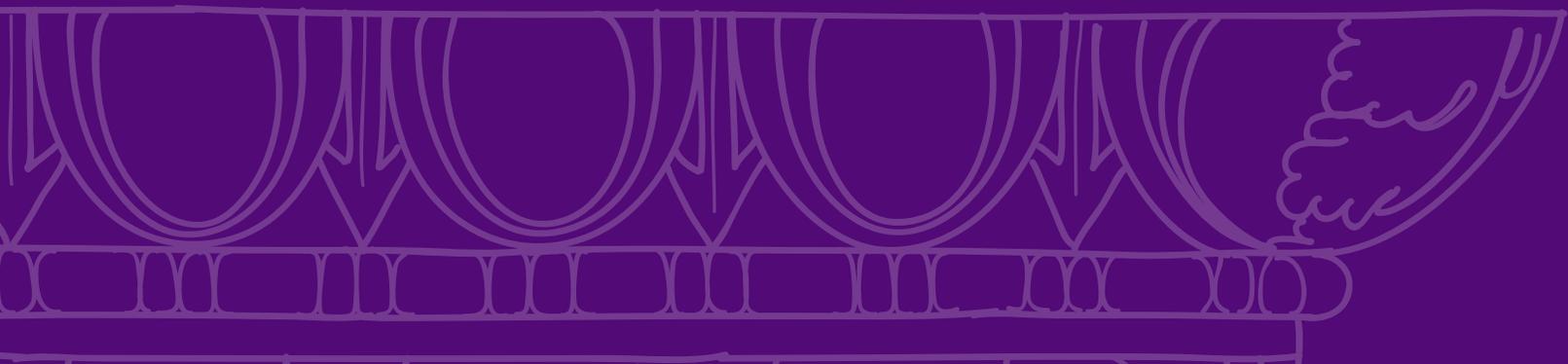


AGB Board of Directors' Statement on
**Board Responsibility
for the Oversight of
College Completion**





This statement was approved on January 21, 2016, by the Board of Directors of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The following principles are intended to offer guidelines and practical suggestions for presidents, chancellors, and board members in using governance as a powerful tool to increase the rate of college completion at their institutions.

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Preface

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One of the most important challenges for American higher education today is increasing the number of students who enroll in and complete their postsecondary education with a high-quality degree or credential. Report after report demonstrates the public benefits of having a well-educated population, from improved economic stability to enhanced research and development to stronger national security. Individual benefits include greater opportunity and financial security, even better health. At the institutional and system levels, and with backing from governors, legislatures, and the president, work is underway to address the need for more college graduates and adults with credentials, but much remains to be done if we are to reach critical goals for completion.

Accomplishing the core institutional¹ mission—educating and graduating students—requires board leadership, advocacy, and accountability. AGB's 2007 "Statement on Board Accountability" reminds board members that they are accountable to institutional mission, the public interest, and the "legitimate and relevant interests of the institution's various constituencies." Each points to student completion as a core board responsibility.

With generous support from Lumina Foundation, AGB has initiated a project to enhance boards' ability to help improve college-completion rates. AGB's work in this area includes a national survey and report on board members' assessments of their knowledge and engagement in college-completion efforts at their institutions. In addition, AGB has led a number of statewide programs, for both public and independent institution board members, focused on board responsibility for the oversight of college completion.

This is not an easy issue. A host of complex problems contributes to low completion rates: poor student preparation for college-level classes, work and family concerns that can derail student progress, and higher education's own structures and processes that are too often geared to yesterday's college students instead of today's. Boards need to be fully engaged in completion efforts to ensure that all students have the support they need to complete degrees or certificates in a timely fashion. AGB's survey shows that the majority of all boards say that completion is among their priorities. However, they also say they do not spend enough time on the topic to make a real difference.

Students, their families, policymakers, accreditors, business leaders, and the general public are pressing for change because improvements in college-completion rates benefit all. This AGB board statement offers guidelines and practical suggestions for presidents, chancellors, and board members in using governance as a powerful tool to increase the rate of college completion at their institutions.

¹ In all cases, "institutional" or "institution" may also refer to system governance or system boards.

Introduction

Graduating students with high-quality degrees and other credentials is the core mission of higher education and a primary goal for state and national leaders, who view college-completion rates through the lens of strategic educational and economic goals. There is good cause for this. In 2011, only 40 percent of 27-year-olds in the United States had an associate's degree or higher. To address this underachievement, state and national goals have been set to increase this figure to approximately 60 percent by 2025. College completion—the percentage of students who successfully complete their degree programs—is front and center for higher education.

Gone are the days when getting from new-student orientation to graduation was solely the responsibility of students. Colleges and universities are now being asked to commit to ensuring the success of all students they enroll. It makes sense. The mission of colleges and universities is not admitting students—it's educating and helping them persist to graduation. Having a degree or a credential provides students with a much-improved pathway to meaningful employment and financial stability. That, in turn, helps ensure that the nation is producing educated and engaged citizens and a qualified workforce to remain competitive in a global marketplace. Of course, college completion affects more than just the jobs that students can secure. Having a college education advances graduates' quality of life, their larger contributions to society, their ability to succeed in a rapidly changing world, and their lifelong learning, among other outcomes. Leading meaningful lives as well as conducting satisfying careers should be goals of the educational process for all students.

While gaining access to higher education is still, for many students, a significant hurdle that must be addressed in order to improve overall educational attainment rates in the United States, the challenge facing enrolled and prospective students is college completion. In 2011, the United States had the highest college-dropout rate in the industrialized world.² In the past 20 years, more than 30 million students enrolled in college in the U.S. left without receiving a degree or a credential. One-third of them left after one semester.³ When students don't complete their education, it creates a ripple effect that not only limits their



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² Harvard Graduate School of Education. "Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century." 2011.

³ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. "Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment but No Completion." Signature Report 7. 2014.

prospects for future careers (and their ability to pay back any student loan debt they may carry), but also creates gaps in the workforce. This ultimately affects the economy by limiting the pool of talent available to fill the growing proportion of jobs requiring some form of postsecondary education. For students who do persist to graduation, it can be a long process with significant opportunity costs, for both the individual and the economy.

A commitment to the success of all students requires an understanding that some students need more support than others for a variety of reasons: inadequate academic preparation, an absence of family history with higher education, or financial or personal circumstances that present obstacles to staying in school. Respectable institution-wide performance in retention and completion can mask significant disparities among students by race/ethnicity, gender, family income level, academic program, and other variables. These disparities not only threaten our nation's ability to develop an educated citizenry and meet future workforce demands, but they also present an ethical and moral challenge for boards and the colleges and universities they govern.

Efforts to advance completion will look different from institution to institution and will depend largely on mission and student characteristics. This statement is designed to be relevant to both two- and four-year institutions and systems.

Principles

Governing boards are accountable for and to the institutions they serve and have important responsibilities to ensure that college-completion goals are based on institutional capacity and mission, are broadly discussed and understood, are sufficiently supported, and are regularly evaluated to ensure progress toward priorities. The following principles outline these responsibilities.

- 1. Boards should declare college completion among their priorities, regularly reviewing metrics about student enrollment, retention, and completion, and using these data for related decision making.**

In AGB's 2015 survey on governing board oversight of college completion, over one-half of board members of independent institutions and almost three-quarters of board members of public institutions and systems reported that oversight of college completion is currently either the most important board priority or among the board's top priorities. However, respondents also reported that their boards do not dedicate sufficient time to meaningful discussions of student progress toward completion.

In the same survey, 80 percent of all boards reported using data and other information about student progress and college-completion efforts to monitor metrics related to institutional goals and priorities. Presidents and boards should engage in regular conversations about institutional data and dashboard indicators





related to student retention and completion rates. Included should be data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, family income, and other categories that are appropriate for the institution and that promote a deeper understanding of important aspects of the institution's completion rates. Additional examples of completion-related data that boards should consider monitoring include:

- ✎ Total number of degrees and certificates awarded, annually and over time;
- ✎ Graduation rates per academic program, annually and over time;
- ✎ Enrollment, retention, and graduation data by part- and full-time students, transfer students, and student groups such as athletes and members of fraternities and sororities;
- ✎ Institutional allocations for student financial aid—both merit and need-based aid—and the retention and graduation rates for students receiving both types of aid;
- ✎ Benchmark data on student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates using the institution's peer group(s), that is, institutions with which it competes for student enrollment as well as its aspirational peers; and
- ✎ Metrics that reflect the diversity of students and their increasingly complex pathways to and through higher education. This is especially important given projected population and demographic shifts over the next few decades.

With this information, boards can make informed judgments about progress toward college-completion goals, engage in meaningful conversations with presidents and senior administrators about the effectiveness of strategies for increasing student completion, and make informed policy decisions that support success for all students. Regular review of institutional metrics and dashboard indicators can also help boards recognize the results of efforts they've approved and the possible need to recommend corrective action to enhance educational quality and other outcomes.

2. Boards should hold the president and senior administrators accountable for progress toward mutually agreed-upon goals for college completion. They should also acknowledge the role of faculty and staff in advancing the completion agenda.

Governing boards should work with their presidents or chancellors and senior staff to set clear goals for college-completion efforts. These goals should serve as benchmarks for institutions and as targets for performance assessments and accountability. Because presidents are tasked with advancing institutional goals, their annual assessments should include institutional performance in reaching completion goals. This focus on accountability for completion can be shared by administrators and faculty, as well, and built into broader assessment activities.

The board-president partnership is critical to an institution's capacity to change or to implement new strategies to fulfill the mission and better support



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initiatives for college completion. Innovative initiatives may require significant changes to established policies as well as to campus culture. Boards should inquire about the development of innovative practices to support college completion, and they must be willing to back the president and other institutional leaders when potentially unpopular decisions are made to support institutional mission and completion goals.

Because faculty members are responsible for the important work of setting standards for educational quality, assessing student development of knowledge and competencies, and enhancing learning through new curricula or pedagogy, boards should encourage a focus on these responsibilities in faculty orientation and through investment in professional-development opportunities for faculty. Academic and student affairs staff also play an increasingly important role in advising students and providing essential services to advance completion goals. In collaboration

with the president, chief academic officer, and chief student services officer, boards should acknowledge and reward faculty and staff members for innovative practices that advance institutional completion goals.

3. Boards should ensure that their institution's mission is clear and that efforts to support college completion are aligned with mission.

Given the diversity of colleges and universities by type, size, history, and purpose, it is understandable that institutional missions vary. Yet, implicit in every institution's mission is a commitment to help students improve their lives through education and, for public institutions in particular, to serve the citizens of the state. This commitment underlies board and institutional responsibility for student persistence and completion of degrees and credentials.

Different missions can require different approaches to reaching college-completion goals. Institutions with open-enrollment policies and those that are highly selective will not have the same expectations for time to degree and

student preparation for college work, or the same approaches to providing academic support. However, regardless of the particulars of mission, the governing board—in collaboration with the president, institutional leaders, and faculty members—should ensure that goals and initiatives related to college completion are focal points of institutional planning and that priorities are in line with the institution’s mission. Presidents should engage their boards in discussions of the mission and values of their institutions, the student bodies they serve, and their commitment to completion. Regular discussion of completion goals will help boards develop a deeper understanding and ownership of institutional goals, policies, and practices that advance (or impede) student success.



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Board actions to support college-completion efforts might include:

- ✎ Creating offices and support services directed toward students in those groups least likely to persist, as determined by institutional data;
- ✎ Promoting policies and practices that enable students to transfer into or from an institution while minimizing credit loss;
- ✎ Ensuring sufficient numbers of faculty and staff to advise students and adequate numbers and sequencing of course sections to ensure timely progress to graduation;
- ✎ Advocating the implementation of strategies that enable students to receive credits for prior learning and experience, such as dual enrollment in high school and college courses, Advanced Placement credits, and competency-based education, which involves awarding academic credit on the basis of what a student knows and can do from employment experience, military service, or other activities;
- ✎ Encouraging reverse-transfer and other related programs that award students with an associate degree if they have successfully completed enough courses to earn a two-year degree, even if they did not finish the coursework to earn a four-year degree;
- ✎ Identifying and changing policies that impede completion; and
- ✎ Making the campus community aware of institutional progress on college-completion measures.

As part of their accountability for mission, boards should understand the policies and practices that advance completion. To develop this understanding, orientation programs for new board members should include discussion of the board's responsibility for the oversight of college completion, among their other responsibilities. In addition, the agendas of appropriate board committees or task forces should provide opportunities for in-depth discussions of relevant data and progress toward completion goals.

4. Boards should ensure that institutional resources are aligned with affordability, retention, and educational quality as they relate to completion.

Board oversight of institutional finances uniquely positions governing boards to ensure that the operating budget and use of resources reflect a commitment to student completion. This begins with affordability and an emphasis on smart investments in academic services and programs that contribute to student retention and positive student-learning outcomes. AGB's survey on boards and college completion found that only 57 percent of boards use information about college completion for budget decisions and allocation of resources.

While completion is the goal, completed degrees and certificates must be of high quality and earned in a timely and affordable manner. Simply getting more students across the finish line is insufficient. The credentials students receive must be valued by prospective employers and graduate schools, and graduates should have the capacity to repay the education loans they take out. For boards, this requires attention to student-learning outcomes as well as performance metrics such as time to degree and loan default rates. There should be no compromises to academic standards in the process of increasing completion rates.

Given the strong correlation between college affordability and completion, boards should carefully balance decisions about tuition and fees with attention to quality and completion. For students, affordability includes opportunity



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costs, so boards should ensure that academic programs allow full-time students to complete a degree or certificate in a reasonable amount of time (for instance, four to six years for a bachelor's degree). Effective and well-staffed advising programs can provide students with clear pathways to completion. These programs can also promote student responsibility for learning and completion of degrees and credentials. For example, talking with students about the consequences of their actions and choices (such as dropped courses, changed majors, under enrollment, or not paying

attention to prerequisites), can help students plan for success.

Boards must also consider investments in the services that have been shown to support student success, such as mental-health counseling, medical clinics or health centers, disabilities services, and other offices and programs that support the health and well-being of students.

Examples of institutional investments and strategies that boards should consider to support timely completion with high-quality credentials include:

- ✎ Technology platforms that allow the development of online and hybrid courses to expand educational opportunities and access;
- ✎ Incentives for exceptional teaching and advising that support student learning and success;
- ✎ Smart advising software and predictive analytics to monitor student progress toward completion and provide targeted interventions that improve progress through courses and academic programs;
- ✎ Adaptive learning to personalize instruction, including well-timed interventions for greater student learning, enhanced progress through coursework, and faster headway to degree;
- ✎ Board and committee oversight of student-learning outcomes, as well as regular follow-up on strategies to improve outcomes (See the 2011 “AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality”);
- ✎ Board oversight of institutional financial-aid policies that encourage and support timely progress toward completion; and
- ✎ Financial investments in robust student counseling, health, and other support services.



Boards must also consider investments in the services that have been shown to support student success, such as mental-health counseling, medical clinics or health centers, disabilities services, and other offices and programs that support the health and well-being of students.

5. Because college readiness and the application of transfer credits affect college completion, boards should ensure that institutional policies reflect a commitment to collaborations with community partners such as K-12 leaders, high school counselors, and other colleges from or to which students transfer.

Many students come to college underprepared for college-level academic work. Many others arrive having completed one or more college-level courses through dual credit or dual enrollment partnerships or through accelerated programs such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. Both circumstances present challenges for colleges and universities to ensure that students are properly supported to achieve their academic goals. They also present opportunities for institutions to work with local and state-level K-12 leaders to better understand how state and school district policies and practices shape college readiness.

Board members should ask about the success of initiatives to promote the development of college-level academic skills in a manner that advances college completion. Traditional approaches to boosting the academic skills of entering college students—including enrolling students in non-credit-bearing remedial courses before they are allowed to take classes that count toward a degree—have limited effectiveness. As an alternative, many institutions are using concurrent enrollment strategies to allow students to enroll in a remedial course while simultaneously enrolling in a related course needed for completion of a degree or credential. This strategy can save states, institutions, and students time and money while enhancing completion rates and reducing time to degree.

A proliferation of accelerated learning opportunities in high schools, together with the accessibility of college courses offered online, has resulted in more students graduating from high school with college credits. Students expect to be able to apply these credits toward their college degrees, saving both time and

money. Other students expect to be able to transfer credits earned at other institutions. More than one-third of first-time students earn credits from at least two institutions.⁴ Boards should ask about institutional policies regarding granting of college credit and applying credits earned elsewhere to particular academic programs. Boards should also advocate for transparent credit acceptance and transfer policies and for effective articulation and transfer agreements that create clear pathways and minimize credit loss for students who transfer to or from their institutions.



Board members should ask about the success of initiatives to promote the development of college-level academic skills in a manner that advances college completion.

⁴ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. "Over One-Third of College Students Transfer At Least Once." July 7, 2015.

Summary of Recommendations



FOR PRESIDENTS AND CHANCELLORS

- ✎ Engage the board in discussions of the mission and values of the institution, the student body the institution serves, and the institution's commitment to completion.
- ✎ Collaborate with the senior staff and board to establish clear goals for college-completion efforts that serve as benchmarks for the institution and as targets for performance assessments and accountability.
- ✎ Ensure that orientation programs for new board members highlight the board's responsibility for the oversight of educational quality and college completion among the full set of responsibilities.
- ✎ Provide the board with meaningful board-level data and dashboard indicators related to student-retention and completion rates. Include data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, family income, organizational involvement, and other categories that are appropriate for the institution. Include information about transfer students and articulation agreements with partner institutions. Engage the board in regular conversations about this information.
- ✎ Ensure that there is a focus on high-quality degrees and credentials, not just *more* degrees and credentials. Regularly provide information on student-learning outcomes and progress on improvement of educational quality.



FOR BOARD MEMBERS

- ❧ Ensure that completion goals are set in the context of institutional mission. Monitor progress toward goals regularly. Boards should not manage the processes for implementation of goals, but they should evaluate the results.
- ❧ Ask questions about the institution’s strategies to help ensure that students complete their degrees or credentials in a timely fashion. Ask whether institutional resources—people and funding—are being appropriately deployed to support completion goals.
- ❧ Include progress on completion goals in the president’s or chancellor’s annual assessment. Hold the president and senior administrators accountable for established goals related to completion and for implementation of effective policies and practices to enhance completion efforts.
- ❧ Allocate time on board and committee agendas to discuss institutional and public policy issues regarding college completion, as well as related opportunities and challenges.
- ❧ Designate one or more board committees to review completion efforts and results. Ensure that committees report to the board regularly on their findings. The full board should review data and engage in conversations about student access, retention, and completion.
- ❧ Insist on board-level summaries of institutional data on student progress toward certificates and degrees, retention rates, and student-transfer and dropout rates. Regularly benchmark performance against that of peer institutions and top-performing institutions, with an eye toward identifying best practices that can be implemented at the institution.
- ❧ Include educational quality in board discussions of completion. Monitor progress toward goals for student-learning outcomes.



QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS

- ❧ How does the institution define and measure college completion?
- ❧ How is the institution tracking student-completion rates? Is it benchmarking graduation rates historically and against peer and aspirational institutions? How are data about completion used in board decision making?
- ❧ What strategies does the institution use to ensure that students complete their degrees in a timely fashion? Are the strategies sufficiently robust to result in increased completion rates? What resources would be necessary to move the needle?
- ❧ How do faculty and staff keep abreast of innovative ideas for teaching and student learning that may accelerate the completion of quality degrees and credentials?
- ❧ What progress has been made in addressing recommendations about graduation and retention rates since the most recent accreditation visit?
- ❧ How are decisions about institutional financial aid supportive of improving completion rates?
- ❧ What policy-level matters are related to educational programs and student-support services aimed at preparing and advising students for the successful completion of their degrees and credentials? How do those matters come to the board?
- ❧ What information has the board requested to receive on a regular basis to feel confident that increased completion is accompanied by high academic quality? Is the information sufficient?
- ❧ How are student counseling and health services adding to the completion effort?
- ❧ How is the institution engaged with local K–12 schools, state education agencies, or other education leaders in an effort to strengthen the readiness of entering college students and to improve their chances of successfully completing a degree or certificate?



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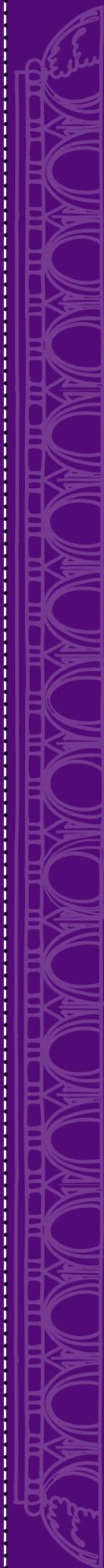
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