AGB ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

The Guardians Initiative™

Reclaiming the Public Trust

THE PROMISE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND STUDENT SUCCESS

The Guardians Initiative: Reclaiming the Public Trust

This paper is one in a series from the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) that explores major challenges confronting higher education. It is part of AGB's Guardians Initiative, an effort to mobilize the individual and collective voices of college and university board members so that they might share their views about the value proposition of higher education and, through that effort, begin to reclaim the public's trust. The series will address separately several of the issues that are likely affecting public confidence, including the return on investment in a college degree, advancing civil discourse, and the value and contributions of academic research. For more information on the Guardians Initiative, and for access to other papers in the series, please visit www.agb.org/guardians.

ABOUT AGB

Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,300 member boards, 1,900 institutions, and 40,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.

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Reclaiming the Public Trust

What is the promise that American higher education makes to society?

The compact between American higher education and the broader society has always been multifaceted. Colleges and universities make a number of promises to society, consistent with each institution's mission, seeking to improve the quality of life through the creation and application of new knowledge and to serve their communities as resources for information, expertise, civic advancement, and cultural and artistic expression. Here we address a central promise: that the nation's institutions of higher education will teach and provide valuable learning to their students. We consider this through the lenses of historical models as well as contemporary endeavors to reimagine educational programs to meet the changing needs of students and society.

Introduction

American higher education today is more focused on ensuring student success than at perhaps any other time in the nation's history.

Changing student demographics, the demands of economic transformation, and heightened public expectations are driving a new era of innovation for the way colleges and universities consider academic offerings, shape curricula to better prepare students for work, and ensure a successful transition into and through the undergraduate experience, ultimately leading to successful attainment of a degree.

While the percentage of young adults aged 25 or older with a college degree has increased from 33 percent in 2000 to 45 percent in 2017, there are troubling signs that the longstanding belief in the value of higher education is being eroded. Consider the findings of a survey conducted by *NBC News/The Wall Street Journal* in August 2017: "Among 18-34-year-olds, just 39 percent now say that a four-year degree is worth the cost, while 57 percent disagree. Just four years ago, those numbers were flipped...."

Earlier in the year, a *Pew Research Center* poll found a similar shift in views among Republicans in particular, with the proportion of those who believed that colleges and universities have a positive effect on "the way things are going in the country" dropping from 54 percent in 2015 to 37 percent in 2017.

Public regard for virtually all sectors of the American economy fluctuates over time, but it is incumbent upon higher education's leaders to do more than observe shifting attitudes. Citizen trustees of colleges and universities have a duty to contribute to the public conversation and to inform understanding of how higher education is delivering on ambitious and longstanding promises to its many stakeholders. This paper concentrates on the most central promise of higher education: the provision of high-quality learning experiences that advance students' career and personal goals. It further identifies both current achievements and forward-looking efforts occurring throughout higher education to boost student success, including:

- **The reorganization of academic offerings around high-impact student learning experiences.**
- **The provision of educational programs that students want, that our economy needs, and that will contribute to students' economic and personal success.**
- **The investment to understand the needs of students and then meet them in a way that smooths transitions from high school to college, and between colleges and universities.**
- **The concerted effort to promote degree completion.**

Reorganizing Academic Offerings

Student Learning

Enrolling in college is, of course, just the first step for students. Once there, most hope to engage in learning experiences that prepare them to make meaningful economic and civic contributions to society. Over the past 15 years, colleges have become much more focused on improving learning, not to comply with external dictates, but for strategic success.

At one time, students were generally expected to learn in ways that suited the professor's teaching preferences. While lectures have not been abandoned, a common teaching philosophy today places shared responsibility for learning on students as well as faculty members. Evidence of this shift can be seen in modern college curricula. For example, based on findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement, George Kuh has identified a set of educational practices that have a significant impact on student success:

- First-year experiences
- Common intellectual experiences
- Learning communities
- Writing-intensive courses
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Undergraduate research
- Diversity/global learning
- Service learning, community-based learning
- Internships
- Capstone courses and projects
- Electronic portfolios

Few students today pass through a college curriculum without exposure to one or more of these practices. In many institutions, multiple high-impact practices are guaranteed to students through graduation requirements.

Predictive Analytics

Besides revising their teaching philosophies, many colleges have begun to leverage student data to greater effect through more responsive academic advising. They have started to discover key indicators that predict student success at both the individual and group levels and to use those indicators to trigger instances of proactive student guidance (often starting with a text message or an email from an advisor).

Institutions are also conducting sophisticated analyses to inform an array of important decisions. For example, if data show students are more likely to succeed in a major if they complete certain courses at a certain level of achievement, then faculty members and administrators can explore crucial questions about the frequency of those course offerings, strengthen instruction in them, and emphasize communication with students about the courses' importance.

Innovative Teaching

Colleges are changing not only what they teach but also how and when they teach. By 2011, the National Center for Education Statistics found that more than half of undergraduates had taken night, weekend, and/or

online classes. That included 52 percent of students at public institutions, 42 percent of students at nonprofit institutions, and 59 percent at for-profit institutions. Notwithstanding the growing appeal of online classes, the traditional lecture is alive and well and, given institutions' need to control costs by offering large classes, it will remain commonplace for the foreseeable future. But faculty members are experimenting with new approaches to make classes in any format more interesting, engaging, and effective. Some are integrating technology, which can include, for instance, the use of hand-held "clickers" to check for students' understanding and elicit their opinions during a lecture, as well as "flipped" classes in which lectures are recorded for students to view as homework so that classroom time can be devoted to student projects and discussion. Other faculty members are integrating approaches that don't require any technology. For instance, many are experimenting with replacing typical assignments with project-based learning, in which teams of students learn by completing activities with real-world implications. To encourage faculty members to try new approaches, many campuses have established centers for teaching and learning.

Promising Innovation

Strengthening Pedagogy: Centre College

The college's Center for Teaching and Learning is helping instructors innovate in the classroom by:

- hosting an array of professional-development events to support instructional effectiveness, searching out new classroom technologies to enhance student learning, and serving as a hub for faculty training;
- sponsoring faculty-led learning communities to stimulate collaboration within and across disciplines, and encouraging research and application of evidence-based teaching and learning practices;
- providing opportunities for faculty to receive feedback about their teaching through observations and focus groups with students conducted by center staff. The observations and resulting feedback are confidential and do not count in the tenure and promotion process; and
- offering a variety of travel awards, grants, and incentives to support faculty growth in the areas of teaching, course design, new approaches to instruction, and research on student learning.

Transforming Educational Programs

The single largest factor influencing higher education during the past 50 years has been the increasing diversity of student backgrounds, experiences, needs, and expectations. Even the terminology has changed, as higher education can no longer consider part-time, first-generation, and older adult students "nontraditional." Instead, those students are now the"new majority," and colleges and universities have, in many cases, reorganized their offerings to serve their diverse needs.

As a result, the content of the curriculum has changed significantly. Table 1 lists the top 10 fields for certificates (below the level of an associate's degree), associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees conferred in 2015. It reveals that some traditional liberal-arts fields remain popular, and more than a third of students earning associate's degrees complete the general education curriculum to transfer to a four-year institution. But career-oriented fields such as business, engineering, and health professions now predominate.

Table 1. Top 10 Fields for Undergraduate Credentials Conferred, 2015

Certificates		Associate's Degrees		Bachelor's Degrees	
FIELD	%	FIELD	%	FIELD	%
Health professions and related programs	35%	Liberal arts and sciences, general studies	36%	Business	19%
Personal and culinary services	13%	Health professions and related programs	20%	Health professions and related programs	11%
Mechanic and repair technologies	9%	Business, management, marketing, and support services	11%	Social sciences and history	9%
Business, management, marketing, and support services	9%	Homeland security, law enforcement, and firefighting	4%	Psychology	6%
Liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities	5%	Computer and information sciences and support services	4%	Biological and biomedical sciences	6%
Precision production	4%	Engineering technologies and engineering-related fields	3%	Engineering	5%
Homeland security, law enforcement, and firefighting	4%	Multi/interdisciplinary studies	3%	Visual and performing arts	5%
Computer and information sciences and support services	4%	Visual and performing arts	2%	Education	5%
Engineering technologies and engineering-related fields	3%	Mechanic and repair technologies/technicians	2%	Communication, journalism, and related programs	5%
Transportation and materials moving	3%	Personal and culinary services	2%	Homeland security, law enforcement, and firefighting	3%

NOTE: Percentage refers to the proportion of all degrees conferred represented by that field.
SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/current_tables.asp.

Students are voting with their feet, and many are choosing fields with the highest wages. A recent Georgetown University study of the wages earned by baccalaureate degree holders found the most popular majors—business, health, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields—are associated with the highest wages, both at entry and mid-career, and that 80 percent of students select majors that are clearly linked to a career field.

Colleges and universities have adjusted their offerings, expanding and adding fields with clear labor-market connections, but they wrestle with how to continue offering liberal-arts majors and courses that foster the critical thinking, reasoning, and communication skills that employers say they value. A 2013 poll of employers by the American Association of Colleges and Universities found that nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) believe that "a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a student's] undergraduate major." Similarly, a recent AGB survey of trustees, who predominantly come from business backgrounds, found broad agreement that liberal-arts skills should be part of all degree programs. In response to such views, many colleges and universities are reengineering their most popular courses to provide students with education relevant to particular careers and those cross-cutting skills necessary to succeed in virtually any field.

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Connecting Education to Work

Higher education has responded to student demand for marketable degrees by offering students more work-based learning opportunities and giving them credit for the knowledge and skills they have acquired on the job. Colleges have long provided internships and co-op programs, but the number of such offerings has grown, and institutions are taking more care to integrate those experiences with what students are learning in the classroom. The National Survey of Student Engagement found that 48 percent of seniors surveyed in 2017 had participated in an internship or other field experience during their undergraduate education. Also, many colleges have expanded their use of prior-learning assessment, external credit recommendations, and credit-by-exam so that students who have amassed knowledge and skills through work experience can gain college credits for that learning.

A few institutions have taken that approach a step further, using a competency-based model that allows students to skip some or all of a required course if they can demonstrate that they already possess the knowledge and skills that the course is intended to teach. That allows students to proceed through their education at a pace dictated by their personal learning needs—saving money and time wherever possible. Competency-based education has not been widely embraced, but the successes of early adopters, such as Southern New Hampshire University and Western Governors University, have encouraged other institutions to consider experimenting with it themselves.

Transitioning into and Progressing through Higher Education

Higher education practitioners have long known that students are most likely to drop out of college during their first year. Traditional programs, such as new-student orientations and college-success courses, are aimed at supporting students during that crucial time. But those important initiatives are not enough. Colleges are addressing the full array of challenges that students face—academic, financial, logistical, and social—but the most widespread and dramatic changes are occurring in the academic realm and are reshaping the way that students experience college.

Required and Remedial Coursework

Remediation is commonplace at most colleges; more than 50 percent of students enrolling in community colleges and nearly 20 percent of students entering four-year colleges or universities are assigned to at least one remedial, or developmental, course to address deficits in their academic preparation. Unfortunately, however, most students taking a remedial course are stymied in their pursuit of a postsecondary credential. Being placed in a remedial course has several negative effects on students: lost time and money, partial redundancy with high-school learning, a discouraging message that they may not be "college material," and disconnection from their educational and career interests. The expected graduation rate for students starting in remediation is 10 percent at community colleges and 35 percent at four-year universities, according to Complete College America.

Colleges are seeking multiple solutions to this complex problem, pursuing the following strategies, among others.

- Colleges are freshly evaluating what college-level literacy and numeracy mean. For many students, passing introductory algebra is a particular stumbling block; moreover, algebra will not be as useful in their lives as statistics or general quantitative-reasoning skills. As a result, some institutions are allowing students to study these alternatives instead of algebra. Far from a diminution of standards, this movement seeks to align a student's skills with his or her aspirations. For instance, most highly selective graduate programs in the health sciences now emphasize the importance of applicants' coursework in statistics. The ability to understand and analyze the results of medical studies that use statistical methods is an essential skill for doctors and other health professionals.

- Colleges are going to greater lengths to ensure that only students who truly need remediation are required to take such courses. Research shows that placement testing alone does not accurately determine a student's need for developmental courses, and it can often result in assigning many students to remediation who could otherwise succeed in a regular college class. Colleges today often look at multiple indicators to gain a more accurate picture of students' academic readiness, including high-school grades and coursework.

- Colleges are rethinking how—or even whether—to offer remedial courses. Instead, some colleges now direct less-prepared students into entry-level, credit-bearing courses while adding "co-requisite" supports, such as tutoring sessions, study-skills classes, and supplemental instruction. This approach, which has spread rapidly across the country, has resulted in significantly improved success rates in gateway math and English courses. Other colleges have moved to individualized, competency-based models that preserve the separation of credit-bearing and remedial work but allow students to move through remediation more quickly.

- Colleges are becoming directly engaged with primary and secondary schools to ensure that students have preparatory experiences that set them on a trajectory for college success. In several states, K-12 and college faculty members have even collaborated to create new courses that allow students to redress academic deficiencies before leaving high school, thereby avoiding the time and expense of remediation.

Promising Innovation

Partners in Assessment: California State University System

The California State University (CSU) system in 2006 started the Early Assessment Program, a partnership among CSU, the California Community Colleges, the California Department of Education, and the California State Board of Education. Students who do not meet the performance standard on a Grade 11 assessment receive targeted supports in Grade 12, including an expository reading and writing course co-designed by CSU faculty members and high school teachers. Students who pass required Grade 12 courses can then bypass remediation courses when they get to college.

The program has shown impressive results. Since 2007, the percentage of entering students able to bypass remedial courses in the CSU system has increased from 42 percent to 62 percent, even as the size of the entering class has grown by more than 10,000 students.

Ensuring Degree Completion

Leaders of other nations understand that a special strength of the American economy is a large college-educated workforce. Indeed, the number of bachelor's degree holders in the United States (over 70 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau) is greater than the total population of more than 200 other countries. Efforts are underway to narrow this gap: 48 countries are now participants in the European Higher Education Area—a collaboration founded in the name of global competition for an educated workforce. And China now produces twice as many graduates a year as the United States, according to a 2017 article published by the World Economic Forum. In China, however, the rush to construct new campuses and push students through is accompanied by concerns about educational quality. Nevertheless, the competition for 21st-century economic supremacy is on, and American higher education is a key driver.

Despite the advantages of a large population and infrastructure (nearly 5,000 accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities), experts agree U.S. progress on college completion is too slow. Lumina Foundation projects the nation's supply of workers with postsecondary credentials will fall more than 16 million short of the number needed by 2025. More than 99 percent of the new American jobs created since the Great Recession have gone to people with at least some postsecondary education.

Governing boards are increasingly attuned to the critical need for degree completion. According to a recent AGB survey of more than 1,000 governing board members, 97 percent of respondents said their board receives data on college completion, and 88 percent said oversight of college completion is a priority.

Awareness and encouragement are important. However, to support robust economic growth, colleges must serve new students, both of non-traditional as well as traditional ages, and find ways to help those who have dropped out to complete a credential. That is an enormous challenge, whose solution requires more than good intentions and strength of will. Commitments of additional public resources at the secondary level and raising the sights of students' post-secondary aspirations and preparation also will be necessary.

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Meta-Majors

One way in which colleges are smoothing the path to completion for all students is reconsidering the way students choose a specific course of study. Institutions traditionally encouraged students to take a broad array of courses before settling on a major—often with little concern about efficient "time to degree." Research has demonstrated that this approach is counterproductive for many students, and some colleges have begun organizing their educational programs into broad fields or "meta-majors" that share common introductory course requirements, such as healthcare or business. That is enabling students to make swifter, more confident progress to a degree, while allowing them time to decide on a precise major.

Student Movement

Students transfer or pause and return to their studies in new institutions for a variety of reasons. Many begin their studies in a community college before transferring to a four-year institution. In fact, data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center show nearly 20 percent of American master's degree holders began their college studies in a community college. But community-college students' progress toward a bachelor's degree becomes more difficult when associate-degree credits are not all accepted toward a bachelor's degree. A 2015 study found that students who transfer 90 to 100 percent of their community-college credits were 2.5 times more likely to finish a bachelor's degree than those who had transferred 50 percent or less.

Transfer between and among four-year colleges and universities is also an important issue. Public colleges and universities understand easing the transfer process to be an important part of their mission. In the past five years, more independent institutions also have implemented or enhanced transfer policies, seeing transfer students as an opportunity to diversify their student bodies, mitigate losses from drop-outs, and even help address enrollment effects from declining numbers of new high-school graduates.

Data on actual student behavior supports this work. Another study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows about 35 percent of students who began their studies in four-year institutions in the fall of 2008 transferred at least once within the next six years, and 19 percent of all transfer students did so more than twice. Experts refer to this phenomenon as "student swirl."

Degree Reclamation

One in five American adults aged 25 or older—more than 35 million people—have dropped out of college without earning a degree. Degree reclamation is a process that hundreds of colleges and universities are adopting to identify people who are close to earning a degree and offer them the support necessary to complete it. Colleges mine student data to identify those who were close to achieving a credential before dropping out. They then perform a comprehensive audit to determine what that student would need to do to finish a credential and inform students about their options for closing the gap. This work is both important and careful, as institutions must maintain standards for educational quality even as they seek to simplify students' final steps.

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Conclusion

Colleges and universities are in a period of profound transformation brought about by a clear realization among educational leaders that the diverse needs of today's student population can only be met through changes at the very core of the academic enterprise: the organization and delivery of instruction. Changes have not occurred and will not occur uniformly across the nation's vast higher education landscape, but it is clear that colleges and universities are taking up the challenge of reinvention to ensure that student learning is a core strength of the enterprise.

In so doing, higher education doesn't just fulfill its promise to individual students. It also fulfills a larger promise to society that a college education will continue to act as a catalyst for economic prosperity, healthy citizenship, and strong communities.

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