

Center for American Progress



A Path Forward

Game-Changing Reforms in Higher Education and
the Implications for Business and Financing Models

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Introduction and summary

At a recent convening of the Alliance of States, Complete College America, a national nonprofit dedicated to growing the pool of American college graduates, advocated for the adoption of five of what it calls “game-changer” strategies that could dramatically increase the number of students who successfully complete college.¹ Well-reasoned and artfully explained, one is left to wonder why any institution or state system would not immediately adopt all five strategies. Indeed, it is clear from the evidence presented by Complete College America that implementing these “game changers” would result in more degrees and other educational credentials being awarded while closing attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations. Also, significantly, no changes in federal policy are necessary to drive forward with the reforms, although some federal policy changes could undoubtedly help quicken the pace of adoption.

One of the game changers—Guided Pathways to Success, or GPS—addresses what is perhaps the most longstanding problem plaguing the American postsecondary education system: the lack of clear pathways for students to take them through postsecondary education to a career. Under the GPS model, students start in a limited number of meta-majors—a set of courses to meet academic requirements across a range of disciplines and programs—and ultimately complete a specific major through a highly structured degree plan. Under these degree plans, every semester of the program would be tightly structured to assure that students have access to key milestone courses when they need them. Technology would be in place to warn advisors when students fall behind so that they can offer timely and effective intervention.² One question left unanswered, however, is whether the degree attained at the end of the GPS process will meet the workforce needs of employers.

In this report, we describe ways that reform models such as those identified as game changers by Complete College America, along with stackable credentials and competency-based credentials, that if taken to scale, can dramatically change the outcomes of postsecondary education in the United States. As used in higher

education in the United States today, stackable credentials are a sequence of credentials that accumulate over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help them move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs.³

We discuss how the current technological and human systems along with business and financing models in postsecondary education impede the development of needed reforms and how the adoption of the most promising reforms could significantly increase the productivity of the nation's postsecondary education system. Today, far too few students complete certificates and degrees, having taken on too much debt. Furthermore, when students do complete a certificate or a degree program, they hear employers say they do not have the right skills for the jobs that are available.

We also propose policy solutions that do not require congressional action that could accelerate the pace and acceptance of reforms with clear and significant implications for students, employers, and ultimately, taxpayers. Specifically, we call on the U.S. secretary of education to design and implement experiments authorized under federal student-aid programs and urge the adoption of quality metrics against which innovative strategies can be assessed. Finally, we urge greater stakeholder—organized labor, employers, and philanthropic organizations—involvement in higher-education innovation.

Now, let's examine in greater detail some of the more promising reforms that seek to improve and strengthen the connection between higher-education systems and employers, and have the potential to solve many of the most pressing problems plaguing both.

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