

Ambitious Goal

Over the last generation, we have increased access to higher education for low-income and underprepared students—now we must ensure those students finish what they start

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In its first hundred days, the Obama administration demonstrated a strong commitment to expanding access to higher education. The economic stimulus package, known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), increased funding for the Pell Grant program and over the next two years, the maximum award will grow to \$5,550 in 2010-11—the largest two-year dollar increase in the program's 35-year history.

In addition, the president's FY 2010 budget plan calls for making the Pell Grant an entitlement, revitalizing and expanding the Perkins Loan program, simplifying the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and creating a new \$2.5 billion program to improve "graduation and success" in higher education. It is too early, of course, to know if Congress will approve these ideas, but it clearly demonstrates the administration's strong commitment to helping low-income students pursue and complete postsecondary education.

But the administration's most far-reaching higher education proposal came in the president's Feb. 24 speech to Congress in which he committed the U.S. to be first in the world in the percentage of adults with postsecondary education by the year 2020. In the president's words, "We will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

This is an extraordinarily ambitious goal. The U.S. once had the world's second-highest percentage of young adults with a college education but has slipped to 11th place. This is not because we are doing worse than before—graduation rates in the U.S. have remained stable. Rather, it is because other nations have expanded their commitments to higher education and have steadily improved. In the coming decade, the challenge will only

increase. Most of the countries with a higher percentage of college graduates have small and relatively stable populations, compared with the U.S. This means that America must significantly increase the number of college graduates if we hope to move up in the rankings. The status quo will only leave us further behind.

Our calculations suggest that the U.S., which currently produces roughly 2.3 million associate and bachelor degrees a year, will need to produce an additional 5 million degree holders above what we would normally produce by 2020 to reach the 55% attainment rate of Canada, the top country at the current time. However,

if, as the Lumina Foundation for Education projects, the top-degree producing country in 2020 has a 60% degree attainment rate, the U.S. would have to produce 7.3 million more degree-holders—more than 700,000 *additional* degree recipients a year every year for a decade—to reclaim the top space.

Achieving the president's goal would be extraordinarily beneficial to the nation's long-term economic growth and social progress. But there is no way we will do it without a broad-based national effort. At a minimum, reaching the goal will require five things.

First, we need better-prepared high school graduates. According to the U.S. Education Department, 72%

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of students who have taken a college-preparatory curriculum in high school (four years of English, three years of math, two years of science and social studies) graduate from college within six years of starting or are still enrolled. But for those who have not taken such a curriculum, the comparable figure is 46%. Many efforts are underway to improve educational performance at the elementary and secondary school level—most notably provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act that require increased accountability and assessment from elementary and secondary schools. If these efforts prove successful, the nation will see increased college enrollments and higher graduation rates.

Second, students and families need better information about postsecondary education opportunities. Extensive research shows many students and their parents lack timely and accurate information about preparing for and financing a college education. Absent that information, families are not as

prepared to plan for postsecondary education as they might be. Extensive efforts are underway to address this lack of information—such as the KnowHow2Go campaign sponsored by Lumina, the American Council on Education and the Ad Council—and the initial results are promising. Other proven initiatives such as federal GEAR UP and TRIO programs have already demonstrated their effectiveness. And the redesign of the FAFSA will be an enormous step in the right direction.

Third, adequate financial aid for low- and middle-income families is absolutely critical. This administration has already demonstrated its strong commitment to student financial aid. The increased Pell funding and the new American Opportunity Tax Credit in the stimulus package, the proposal to make the Pell Grant program a full entitlement and to revitalize the Perkins Loan program are hugely important steps. Other forms of financial assistance, such as the much-anticipated new GI Bill, which is designed to enable a veteran to attend any

public college or university tuition-free, will also help meet the needs of students and families.

Fourth, state governments need to meet their responsibilities. It's no secret that state support for public higher education has been falling for the past 25 years. Just last year, the National Conference of State Legislatures chastised its own members for treating higher education as the "balance wheel" of state budgets, receiving whatever is left after other priorities like K-12 education and transportation have been funded.

Unfortunately, the recession has meant another round of deep budget cuts for many public institutions. Unless we maintain state support for public campuses to minimize tuition increases, boosting federal student aid will have little lasting impact. It now appears the federal government is prepared to do its part on student aid. Will the states? There is simply no way we will produce 700,000 more college graduates a year if we keep cutting funding. Indeed, we will need to increase higher education's capacity, and that will require more money.

Finally, sharply increasing the number of college graduates will require a renewed commitment to student graduation and success by colleges and universities. Many academically able students leave college without getting a degree. The reasons vary. But too many students fall through the cracks when intervention and support services by the institutions could enable them to finish their education. Over the last generation, we have dramatically increased our efforts to expand access to higher education for low-income and underprepared students. Now we must make a similar effort to ensure that those students finish what they start.

The president's goal will require a long-term effort by multiple actors, particularly higher education institutions themselves. It remains to be seen if America and its colleges and universities have the energy, wisdom and commitment to achieve it.

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