

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving the National Postsecondary Degree Attainment Goals

Michael T. Nettles

Contents

National Postsecondary Degree Attainment Goals and Population Gaps 2

Workforce Development a Primary Motivation for Goals 2

Forecasting Degree Attainment and Gaps among Population Groups..... 3

 Federal Goal: 60% Degree Attainment by 2020, Ages 25–34..... 4

 Lumina Goal: 60% Degree Attainment by 2025, Ages 25–64 5

Actions Needed to Accelerate Progress toward Postsecondary Degree-Attainment Goals..... 6

 Raise Pre-College Students’ Expectations..... 6

 Increase the College Entry of Recent High School Graduates..... 6

 Recruit Degree Stop-outs 7

Conclusion..... 7

References..... 8

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

National Postsecondary Degree Attainment Goals and Population Gaps

United State Government’s Postsecondary Degree Completion Goal: By 2020, 60% of the U.S. population ages 25–34 to have an associate degree or higher

Lumina Foundation’s “Goal 2025”: By 2025, 60% of the U.S. population ages 25–64 to have a high-quality postsecondary certificate, associate degree or higher

In 2009, at the end of the 12-month Great Recession, the U.S. government established a college degree attainment goal for 60% of the 25- to 34-year-old population to have earned an associate or bachelor’s degree by the year 2020. In the same year, the Lumina Foundation set a similar goal for 60% of 25- to 64-years-olds to earn a high-quality certificate, associate degree or bachelor’s degree by the year 2025. Both degree attainment goals are ambitious for the nation’s population overall, but they are especially challenging for the racially, ethnically and socioeconomically underserved segments of the U.S. population whose present attainment rates are farther away from the goal.

Workforce Development a Primary Motivation for Goals

Eleven of the 15 fastest-growing occupations in the United States require some college and **nine of those 15** require an associate or bachelor’s degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Preparing people for the contemporary workforce is the primary impetus for the federal government and Lumina Foundation postsecondary degree attainment goals. With the nation’s growing demand for a more highly educated and skilled workforce, postsecondary degrees and credentials have shifted from being a commodity reserved for the privileged few to an urgent necessity for a broad cross-section of the United States population. Eleven of the 15 fastest-growing occupations in the United States require some college, and nine of those require an associate or bachelor’s degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The degree attainment goals were established to reflect the alignment of higher education policy with current and emerging labor market demands and forecasts.

Unemployment rates for the overall population and among the various major race/ethnic groups decline at successive levels of degree attainment, but race/ethnic group gaps persist. The 25- to 34-year-old population ranges from 8% overall unemployment among people with high school diplomas down to under 3% for people with bachelor’s degrees (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). For the African American, American Indian and Hispanic populations, the unemployment rates are much higher than they are for the White and Asian American populations at each level of educational attainment. For example, African Americans comprised roughly 12% of both the 25- to 34-year-old and 25- to 64-year-old populations in 2015, yet they represented 25% of the unemployed 25- to 34-year-olds and 21% of the unemployed 25- to 64-year-olds. The pattern of under-representation in high-level degrees and over-representation in relatively low-level degrees for the three minority population groups is also reflected in their employment status attainment. African Americans, American

¹ To download the full report, go to <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12141>

Indians and Hispanics are underrepresented among high-demand and emerging professional occupations. While education attainment is only one factor contributing to employment status differences among population, the patterns suggests that it is a prominent factor.

This relationship of the postsecondary degree goals to emerging high-demand occupations is an indication of the urgent need for the goals. The relationship of postsecondary degree attainment to emerging high-demand occupations, coupled with the different employment status attainment rates among race/ethnic groups, reveals a need for also taking a closer look at how trailing population groups are faring in their pursuit of degree attainment, and monitoring the relationship of degree attainment toward reversing their pattern of underrepresentation in high-demand and high-status jobs.

Forecasting Degree Attainment and Gaps among Population Groups

Target years (2020 and 2025): Neither goal is expected to be reached by the adult population, overall.

Good News:

The Asian American population has already exceeded the goals.

White women are projected to reach the federal government goal by the target year.

The overall White population is expected to reach both goals beyond the target years, but within the projection period, which goes to 2060.

By 2060, 43 years from today, the farthest date by which the Bureau of Census projects the overall U.S. population, African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native and Hispanic populations are projected **not to achieve** the goals.

Using current trends in degree attainment and population trends estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau, future degree attainment representation is projected for each major race/ethnicity and gender group in each of the two age ranges (25- to 34-year-olds and 25- to 64-year-olds). Projections reveal that neither goal is expected to be reached by target dates by the adult population, overall, but that Asian American men and women have already exceeded both of the 60% goals. White women are expected to achieve the federal government goal on time and Lumina foundation goal nearly on time. The White population, overall, is predicted to arrive at the goals a few years beyond the target years of 2020 and 2025 established by the U.S. government and Lumina Foundation, respectively.

By contrast, the prospects of the African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic populations attaining the goals in the next 40 years are not promising. Unless present trends are accelerated for men and women of these groups for each level and type of degree, and especially bachelor's and higher degrees, not only will the three population groups (African American, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native) fail to reach the goals in the foreseeable future, but also the progress that they make could be overrepresented by lower-status degrees and certificates and, in turn, they are likely to continue being overrepresented in relatively low-wage occupations.

Federal Goal: 60% Degree Attainment by 2020, Ages 25–34

At the present pace of adult population growth and growth in degree attainment of 25- to 34-year-olds, 2041 is the projected year by which the nation can be expected to reach the federal government’s 60% degree attainment target. Furthermore, the trajectories of the major race/ethnicity groups in comparison to that of the overall U.S. population is striking (see Figure 1).

African Americans, American Indians/Alaska Natives and Hispanic men and women are far behind Asian American and White men and women relative to the national degree attainment goal for 25- to 34-year-olds. Unless there is a dramatic increase in degree attainment rates that far exceeds the pace of the 2006–2014 annual average rates of increase, then the African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic populations are not expected to reach the 60% degree attainment goal by 2060, the time frame for which the U.S. Census Bureau currently forecasts the U.S. population.

Figure 1. Federal Goal Year of 60% Degree Attainment U.S. Population and Major Race/Ethnicity Ages 25–34

Met or Projected to Meet the 60% Degree Attainment Goal by 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asian Population Overall (Above 60% as of 2014)• Asian Males (Above 60% as of 2014)• Asian Females (Above 60% as of 2014)• White Females (In 2019)
Projected to Reach 60% College Degree Attainment by 2060	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• U.S. Population Overall (In 2041)• White Population Overall (In 2027)• White Males (In 2038)• African American Females (In 2058)
Projected Not to Reach 60% Degree Attainment by 2060	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• African American Population Overall• African American Males• American Indian/Alaska Native Population Overall• American Indian/Alaska Native Males• American Indian/Alaska Native Females• Hispanic Population Overall• Hispanic Males• Hispanic Females

Lumina Goal: 60% Degree Attainment by 2025, Ages 25–64

The 25- to 64-year-old U.S. population is not expected to reach 60% attainment until 2056, 15 years after the 25- to 34-year-old population. As with the younger population group, the differences in the trajectories among the race/ethnicity groups are dramatic (see Figure 2).

By the year 2025, the Asian American population is projected to be at nearly 66% of 25- to 64-year-olds having earned an associate or bachelor’s degree, far exceeding each of the other population groups and Lumina Foundation’s goals, even before taking into account the addition of high-quality certificates. With the exception of the Asian American population, each race/ethnic population group needs to make substantially more progress than it is presently making in order to achieve the Lumina Foundation’s goal. And, as with the federal government’s goal, African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic groups need to make such extraordinary progress that it is very unlikely that they will reach the goal by 2060, the farthest year out that the Census Bureau forecasts population projections.

Figure 2. Lumina Goal Year of 60% Degree Attainment U.S. Population and Major Race/Ethnicity Ages 25–64

Met the 2025 60% Degree Attainment Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asian Population Overall (Above 60% as of 2014)• Asian Males (Above 60% as of 2014)• Asian Females (Above 60% as of 2014)
Projected to Reach 60% College Degree Attainment by 2060	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• U.S. Population Overall (In 2056)• White Population Overall (In 2042)• White Males (In 2054)• White Females (In 2034)
Projected Not to Reach 60% Degree Attainment by 2060	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• African American Population Overall• African American Males• African American Females• American Indian/Alaska Native Population Overall• American Indian/Alaska Native Males• American Indian/Alaska Native Females• Hispanic Population Overall• Hispanic Males• Hispanic Females

Actions Needed to Accelerate Progress toward Postsecondary Degree-Attainment Goals

Underserved population groups may require targeted and tailored initiatives in order for them to make substantive progress toward persisting in postsecondary institutions and attaining college degrees in greater numbers than they are today.

Raise Pre-College Students' Expectations

High school students' expectations of pursuing postsecondary degrees is one indication of the long-term prospect of achieving the goal. Overall, roughly 62% of the nation's three million ninth-graders indicate that they expect to earn an associate or bachelor's degree or higher. As with other indicators, there are rather stark race/ethnic and gender differences in the expectations. Across all race/ethnic groups, a larger percentage of women than men expect to attain a degree. For combined associate and bachelor's degrees, White (69%), Asian American (68%) and African American (66%) women lead in degree expectations; smaller percentages of Hispanic (56%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (51%) women express expectations of attaining college degrees. A larger percentage of Asian American (65%) men express expectations of attaining a college degree, compared to White (63%), African American (61%), Hispanic (55%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (41%) men. A bachelor's or higher degree is the overwhelming preference of each race/ethnic group.

Recommendations aimed toward increasing degree attainment might include strategies for raising the expectations of high school students of achieving a college degree.

Increase the College Entry of Recent High School Graduates

Sixty-six percent of the roughly three million high school graduates each year enter 2- or 4-year colleges within a year of graduating from high school (U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This rate of entering college immediately following high school varies by race, with 80% of the Asian American population group, 69% of the White population, 58% of the African American population and 60% of the Hispanic population entering postsecondary educational institutions within a year of graduating from high school (the American Indian/Alaska Native population group is not reported).

Colleges and universities in the United States represent a broad spectrum of admissions standards, including highly selective, moderately selective and open admissions, and many offer remedial/developmental curricula and courses to accommodate the vast array of students who are not sufficiently academically prepared (Shannon, & Smith, 2006). Because of the large number of U.S. colleges and universities and broad range of admissions requirements, even the lack of academic preparation, as important as it may be for student success in college, is not an impediment to college admissions. High school grades and test scores may limit the type of postsecondary institutions as options available to students, but they do not prevent students from being admitted and attending a postsecondary institution (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007).

Concern about race/ethnic inequality in student access and postsecondary attainment goes beyond considering the level of degrees being completed and includes the selectivity of colleges and universities that students attend. While each of the major population groups is represented overall in undergraduate education at or nearly the same proportion as they are represented in the adult population of the United States, they are not distributed

in such adequately representative proportions along the college and university selectivity continuum. African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic populations are severely underrepresented in the most selective colleges and universities, while White and Asian American populations are overrepresented in those same colleges and universities.

Among the key elements for increasing college enrollment and degree completion rates of underrepresented population groups are improving pre-collegiate academic, financial and social preparation along with admissions test scores. Policies and practices aimed at improving the present conditions for underrepresented and underserved students along these dimensions are likely to yield greater college- and career-readiness outcomes and, in turn, lead to greater degree attainment rates.

Recruit Degree Stop-outs

Recruiting college stop-outs, former college students who have not completed a degree, for reentry into the postsecondary pipeline is among the most promising strategies for improving degree attainment rates toward achieving national goals. To achieve both the federal government and Lumina Foundation college degree attainment goals, the nation needs its postsecondary institutions to dramatically increase degree production overall, and even more for underserved populations. Although some unconventional approaches can be expected to contribute to achieving the goals, the lion's share will be the result of efforts by conventional colleges and universities, including completion colleges.² One strategy for achieving national degree attainment goals is to recruit, retain and graduate students who were enrolled in college during an earlier time period, but dropped out without earning a degree. Given that individuals with some college but no degree make up nearly a quarter of the adult population, they represent a potentially abundant source of additional college graduates who may possibly yield a large return on investment. Thirty-six million people between 25 and 64 years old have at some point attended postsecondary institutions but dropped or stopped out without earning a degree. They represent nearly a quarter (23%) of the 25- to 64-year-old U.S. population and collectively provide a much larger pool of prospects for postsecondary institutions to recruit than the pool of 18- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. population.

Conclusion

Extraordinary attention and innovation are needed for the nation's overall population and its underserved populations to reach the national postsecondary attainment goals. While it appears that the nation is far from achieving the goals, ambitious goals to increase postsecondary participation have been established in the past, and extraordinary efforts to achieve them have historically been successful.

Setting, and even achieving, ambitious goals for postsecondary education is not unprecedented in the United States. Even goals as ambitious as the postsecondary degree attainment goals of the United States government and Lumina Foundation have been set and achieved in the past. In 1947, President Truman announced his national goal of doubling higher education enrollment by 1960. At the time of his announcement, there were 2.3 million students enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities. By 1963, enrollments had indeed doubled to 4.7 million. Yet, the goals were accomplished only with extraordinary innovations and policies. Establishing community colleges and federal student financial aid for veterans of the military, and later financial aid and subsidies for the broader population, were among the innovations, along with progressive policies including the expansion of adult education and efforts to end racial and religious discrimination in higher education (President's Commission on

² Completion colleges are colleges or programs that focus primarily on supporting adult learners with previous college credit.

Higher Education, 1947). While much has been accomplished toward generating a broad array of support to states for strengthening colleges and universities and financial aid to individual students, much work remains toward closing gaps among population groups.

Education achievement goals of the nation that cover both K–12 and postsecondary education, with an emphasis on college completion, are in keeping with this tradition of U.S. government leadership of the nation's education policy, even with limited constitutional authority. Having a major philanthropic foundation and the 50 states provide leadership in the way that the Lumina Foundation and 50 state governors have may be unprecedented. The degree attainment goals set forth by the federal government and by the Lumina Foundation provide the public with targets that may arguably contribute to the sustainability, growth and prosperity of the nation. Historically, national education policies have been a catalyst for achieving educational equity. Today's degree attainment policies may provide the kind of stimulus that the African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic populations need to eventually achieve national goals and close gaps. However, these policies may also need components that are tailored and targeted more to the particular needs of the population groups in order to accelerate the pace of their progress.

Many game-changing innovations may emerge as the nation progresses toward the goal of regaining preeminence in education. Extraordinary efforts and innovations are needed to ensure that the overall population accelerates progress toward the goals, and that the African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic populations accelerate their pace in closing gaps with Asian American and White population groups in rates of degree attainment.

References

- MacAllum, K., Glover, D. M., Queen, B., & Riggs, A. (2007). Deciding on postsecondary education: Final report. NPEC 2008-850. *National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)*. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED499339.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of education statistics 2014 50th Edition: Table 302.10. Recent high school completers and their enrollment in 2-year and 4-year colleges, by sex: 1960 through 2013*. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016006.pdf>
- President's Commission on Higher Education. (1947). *Higher education for democracy: A report of the president's commission on higher education* (Vol. 1 & 2). New York, NY: Harper.
- Shannon, H. D., & Smith, R. C. (2006). A case for the community college's open access mission. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2006* (136), 15–21.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2015). Employment Projections: 2014-24 News Release. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.htm>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). Table 10. Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by educational attainment, age, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino and non-Hispanic ethnicity, Annual Average 2015 (Source: Current Population Survey). Unpublished manuscript.



Download the full report at
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12141>

Copyright © 2017 by Educational Testing Service. All rights reserved. ETS, the ETS logo and MEASURING THE POWER OF LEARNING are registered trademarks of Educational Testing Service (ETS). 37720



Measuring the Power of Learning.®

www.ets.org